NORTH CAPE 1943

The Sinking of the *Scharnhorst*

ANGUS KONSTAM

ILLUSTRATED BY EDOUARD GROULT

CAMPAIGN 356

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Series editor Nikolai Bogdanovic

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ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Battle of North Cape, fought in the freezing waters off the northern tip of Norway, was the last of its kind. Never again would two battleships fight a duel to the death on the high seas. This was a battle fought in the old way, using surface warships, guns and torpedoes, without the intervention of aircraft or submarines. The battle itself was the climax of a long and bitterly contested naval campaign, where the prize was control of the sea – in this case, the icy waters of the Arctic. The stakes, though, were much higher than just that. Through these same waters ran one of the most strategically important sea routes of World War II. The Arctic convoys brought war materials from the Western Allies to the beleaguered Soviet Union, as it tried to stem the advance of Hitler's armies. More than that, though, these convoys represented a commitment between allies – a visible demonstration that they fought alongside each other in the war against Nazi Germany.

By late 1943, the war at sea had changed dramatically. As events off Norway, Dunkirk, Malta, Crete and Malaya had proved, air power was now a key factor in naval warfare. The aircraft carrier, rather than the battleship, was the real arbiter of victory at sea. Similarly, while the U-boat proved a highly effective naval tool, by the summer of 1943 the Kriegsmarine had been forced to concede victory to the Allies in the Battle of the Atlantic.

The core of the German battlegroup in northern Norway was the battleship *Tirpitz*. The sister ship of the *Bismarck* served as a 'fleet in being' – which meant her mere presence in Arctic waters posed a threat to the Arctic convoys.

Now, in late 1943, the Kriegsmarine was on the defensive. Of its four battleships, only two – *Scharnhorst* and *Tirpitz* – remained in service. However, their mere presence in Arctic waters forced the British to deploy considerable naval resources to protect these convoys. So, the British Admiralty was keen to destroy these battleships by any means. In September, *Tirpitz* was damaged in an attack by British midget submarines, and put out of action for several months. That left *Scharnhorst*.

On 22 September 1943, in an attack codenamed Operation *Source*, three British midget submarines known as X-craft penetrated the defences of the Kåfjord, and seriously damaged the battleship *Tirpitz* as she lay inside this screen of anti-torpedo nets. As a result, *Scharnhorst* became the Kriegsmarine's sole remaining operational battleship.

Admiral Bruce Fraser, commanding the British Home Fleet, was determined to sink her. Now, though, thanks to the cracking of the Enigma codes, he expected to know when *Scharnhorst* put to sea. Then, his warships' superior radar could help find her, even in the dark of an Arctic winter, and bring her to battle. In December 1943, these factors would dictate the course and pace of the Battle of North Cape. While aircraft and U-boats played their part in the campaign, the main players were British and German surface warships. When it came, this battle would be fought in the teeth of a gale, and in the darkness of the Arctic, where night lasts for 20 hours a day. Then there was the icy cold, which tested the endurance of the sailors to their limits. They knew, too, that if their ship was sunk in battle, their chances of survival in the freezing waters of the Barents Sea were virtually non-existent.

Today, the Battle of North Cape is barely remembered, especially when compared to the other great naval clashes of World War II. It was, though, of immense strategic importance – more so even than the sinking of the *Bismarck*, or even the swirling carrier battles fought in the South Pacific. This was the Kriegsmarine's last great hurrah. The battle resulted in the sinking of Germany's last operational battleship. This helped guarantee the safety of the remaining Arctic convoys, and it allowed the Allies to redeploy warships to the Far East, where they were needed in the fight against Japan. It was the last true clash of battleships, a duel to the death fought by these naval dinosaurs whose days were already numbered. Above all, it is the story of the thousands of young sailors of both sides who fought each other off North Cape that December. As a result, many of them lost their lives in their burning, sinking ship, or succumbed in those dark, cold, Stygian waters.

Admiral Fraser enjoyed an important advantage over his German opponent. An intercepted Enigma radio message had been decoded and passed on to him by the Admiralty. This told him that *Scharnhorst* was at sea, and so he was able to deploy his forces to ambush her. This information was later confirmed by members of the Norwegian resistance.

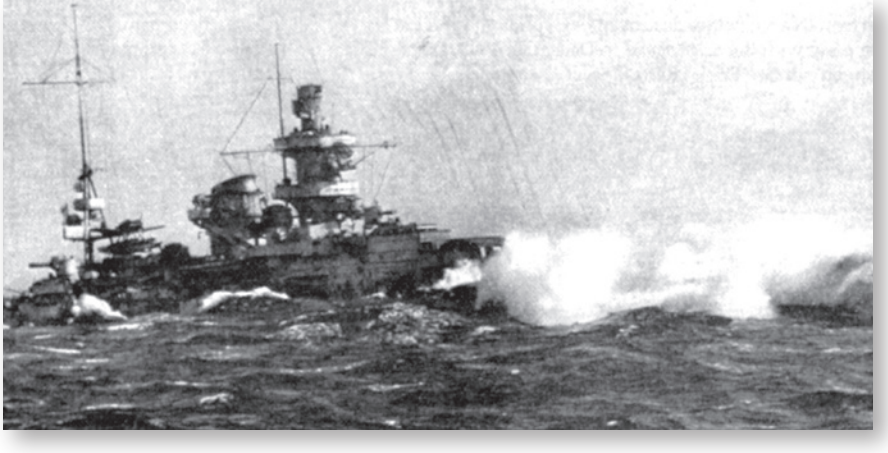
The strategic situation, late 1943

Scharnhorst, with *Gneisenau* lying behind her, off her starboard bow, pictured at anchor off Kiel in the autumn of 1939, shortly before the outbreak of war, and their first wartime sortie into the Atlantic. Further off is a Deutschland-class armoured cruiser.

THE STRATEGIC SITUATION

Appropriately enough, Operation *Ostfront* (*Eastern Front*) came about as a result of Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. By August, the Red Army had been driven back hundreds of miles, and had lost over half a million men. Powerful German thrusts were aimed at both Leningrad and Moscow, and it seemed as if the German Army was unstoppable. Begrudgingly, Stalin requested that the Western Allies do what they could to help. At that stage of the war, there was little that Britain and the Commonwealth could do directly – after all, the army was hard-pressed in Africa, and the navy was embroiled in its struggle with the Italian fleet. What they could do, and what Prime Minister Winston Churchill pledged, was to supply the Soviet Union with weapons and ammunition. While a land supply route was possible through Persia, this would take time to establish, and was fraught with logistical problems. A more direct route, then, was to ship the supplies directly to the Soviet Union.

The first Arctic convoy, made up of just seven ships, sailed from Liverpool on 12 August, collected its escort in Scapa Flow and then pressed on to Hvalfjord in Iceland. After a day's refuelling, it left Iceland on 21 August, and headed across the Arctic Ocean towards the northern tip of Norway. The northern Russian port of Murmansk was under regular German air attack, and so the convoy headed to Archangel, 400 miles further to the east. It arrived there on 31 August. All of the merchant ships made it safely



A rare and grainy photograph of *Scharnhorst* in rough weather, taken from her sister ship *Gneisenau* during Operation *Berlin* – the North Atlantic sortie by the two battleships in early 1941. Forward of her mainmast is the catapult for her Arado Ar-196 float plane.

An Arctic convoy, anchored in the Kola Inlet, the seaward approaches to Murmansk. These ships, and ones like them, provided a maritime supply line of immense strategic and political importance. From 1942 onwards, their safe transit of the Barents Sea became the British Home Fleet's greatest priority.

into port. This operation established the pattern of what would follow. The convoy itself was protected by a close escort of destroyers, minesweepers and armed trawlers. It was also guarded by a Distant Cover Force from the Home Fleet, in this case consisting of the aircraft carrier *Victorious*, two heavy cruisers and three destroyers. Their job was to intercept any sortie by surface warships of the Kriegsmarine. All subsequent Arctic convoys would be protected in a similar way.

In late September 1941, a slightly larger convoy, designated PQ 1, made the same voyage from Hvalfjord to Archangel. This time, the main component of the cargo comprised 193 Hawker Hurricane fighters, packed into crates. The designation 'PQ' was given to all outbound convoys, named after an officer in the Admiralty's operations division, Commander Phillip Quellyn Roberts. Return convoys were given the designation 'QP'. By the end of 1941, a total of six convoys had made it safely through to Russia, and a seventh was at sea – it would arrive in Murmansk on 12 January 1942. All but the last two of these went to Archangel, but after the port became blocked by the winter pack ice, the convoys headed to Murmansk. By now, though, the Germans were aware of these major operations, and were busy deploying surface warships, U-boats and combat aircraft to northern Norway, to oppose them.

The entry of the United States into the war in December 1941 meant these convoy operations were stepped up. The first loss came on 2 January 1942, when the SS *Waziristan* was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat. During the spring, the Kriegsmarine assembled a powerful surface force in Norway. Its core was the powerful battleship *Tirpitz* – sister ship of the *Bismarck* – and she was supported by the armoured cruisers *Lützow* and *Admiral Scheer*, and the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, backed up by a flotilla of destroyers. The Channel Dash of February 1942 was driven by the Kriegsmarine's need to redeploy even more of its surface ships in Norwegian waters. This operation – a 'dash' through the English Channel en route from Brest to Kiel – resulted in damage to both *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, as well as the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. Subsequently, though, *Gneisenau* was so badly damaged in a bombing raid on Kiel that she was decommissioned.

Most convoys continued to make it through safely, even PQ 12, which was the target of a sortie by the *Tirpitz*. This sortie, designated Operation

Sportpalast by the Kriegsmarine, achieved little apart from the loss of the SS *Izhora*, a straggler from the returning convoy QP 8. In fact, on 9 March, *Tirpitz* was located by aircraft from the aircraft carrier *Victorious* as she returned to her base near Narvik. The resulting air strike, though, was unsuccessful. During this phase of the war, the biggest threat to the Allied sailors was the weather, as the convoy passed through some of the most inhospitable waters on earth. Slowly, though, the German pressure began to mount. In late March, convoy PQ 13 lost five merchant ships, over a quarter of the convoy. Of these, two were torpedoed by U-boats and two were lost in air attacks, while a fifth was sunk by the destroyer *Z-26*.

Each subsequent outbound convoy lost ships, and by June 1942, the total had reached 21 merchant ships, as well as three light cruisers and two destroyers. All of this was nothing compared to the disastrous losses to convoy PQ 17. It was now mid-summer, a time of nearly constant daylight in the Arctic. So, the 36 merchant ships of PQ 17 were easy for the Germans to spot, and to intercept. The threat of a German surface sortie was enough to convince First Sea Lord Dudley Pound that the convoy's best chance was to scatter. The surface threat never actually materialized, and the unprotected merchantmen were easily picked off by U-boats and bombers. A total of 23 merchant ships were sunk, making this the biggest convoy loss of the entire war. The Allies suspended all further convoys until the autumn, and the return of longer nights. If *Tirpitz* had sortied as planned, Allied losses might have been even greater.

The sortie had been cancelled by Hitler, who was fearful that *Tirpitz* would be placed in jeopardy. After the loss of *Bismarck*, he was playing it safe, and insisted that the Kriegsmarine pursue a policy of minimum risk. This, of course, did little to foster an offensive spirit in the Arctic battlegroup. By the time the Arctic convoys resumed in September, the convoy escorts were stronger, and better protected by the Home Fleet. Escort carriers were also introduced to the 'Murmansk Run', which provided the convoy with much-needed air cover. PQ 18, which sailed in mid-September, bore the brunt of heavy German attacks, and 13 merchant ships were lost. However, the Germans suffered too, losing four U-boats and 44 aircraft. In the next two return convoys, QP 14 and QP 15, eight merchant ships were sunk, together with two destroyers and a smaller escort. It seemed as if the whole scale of the Arctic conflict had now been increased, with both sides committing all available resources to the struggle.

The next convoy was scheduled for mid-December. By now, though, the convoy designations had changed. Outbound ones were designated 'JW' rather than 'PQ', while homeward-bound convoys were labelled 'RA'. This time, the convoys were split into smaller groups. So, JW 51A with 14 merchant ships sailed from Loch Ewe in the west of Scotland on 15 December, while the 14 ships of JW 51B left there a week later. The first convoy arrived safely in Murmansk on

Scharnhorst's sister ship *Gneisenau*, viewed from the *Scharnhorst* while the two battleships were operating in consort with each other. This proved a very successful partnership off Norway in 1940, and in the North Atlantic the following year. It ended, though, in February 1942, when the *Gneisenau* was so badly damaged in an Allied air raid that she had to be decommissioned.

On several occasions during 1942 and 1943, the German surface battlegroup had sortied from Norwegian waters, to carry out attacks on the Arctic convoys. Here, the armoured cruiser *Lützow* and the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* are seen from the deck of a German destroyer in July 1942, as they sail north to join the *Tirpitz* for a sortie against Convoy PQ 17.

Christmas Day. It ran into a gale in the Norwegian Sea, and became scattered. It was still trying to regroup on 30 December, when it was spotted by a U-boat, some 150 miles south-west of Bear Island. That evening, the cruisers *Lützow* and *Admiral Hipper* sortied from the Altenfjord, accompanied by six destroyers. Codenamed Operation *Regenbogen*, this mission was designed to catch the convoy between two German pincers.

Instead, on New Year's Eve, both German pincers were ignominiously driven off by the convoy's escort of destroyers and light cruisers, under the command of the then Rear Admiral Robert Burnett. Both sides lost a destroyer apiece in what became known as the Battle of the Barents Sea. Essentially, the British fought extremely well, defending the convoy and driving off far more powerful German forces. The real value of the battle, though, was the effect it had on Hitler. He saw the battle as a failure, and announced his intention to scrap the Kriegsmarine's major surface ships. He would then mount their guns as coastal defence batteries. Hitler never understood naval strategy, and he rejected the advice of Grossadmiral Erich Raeder, who saw the German ships as a 'fleet in being', tying down superior numbers of the enemy. In mid-January 1943, Raeder resigned, and so Karl Dönitz, the commander of the U-boat fleet, became the new head of the Kriegsmarine. Eventually, he mollified Hitler by scrapping three cruisers. The rest of the Arctic battlegroup was saved.

This was the political climate when *Scharnhorst* arrived in the Altenfjord in early 1943. After dispatching two more convoys, the Allies suspended operations until the following autumn. Meanwhile, the situation on the Eastern Front was deteriorating rapidly, with the German Army suffering huge losses at Kharkov and Kursk. The Soviets began driving the Germans

Merchant ships from an Arctic convoy, in this case JW 53, at anchor in the Kola Inlet. It often took weeks to unload a whole convoy, during which time they were vulnerable to air attacks. So, escort vessels, like the corvette pictured in the foreground, remained with them to provide anti-aircraft protection.

When *Scharnhorst* arrived in the Altenfjord, she was moored in an offshoot of it, the Kåfjord. She was moored just below the Auskarnes Peninsula, at the top left of this aerial reconnaissance photograph, protected by lines of anti-torpedo nets. The rectangular box nearby was the usual berth of the armoured cruiser *Lützow*. *Tirpitz* can be seen in her own protected mooring, in the bottom left corner of the photograph.

back, and so political pressure began to mount on the Kriegsmarine to do what it could to help. However, by then there were severe shortages in fuel oil, and the Luftwaffe had moved many of its bomber squadrons from Norway to Russia. By the time the Arctic convoys resumed in November 1943, when the winter darkness could hide the ships, the ability of the Kriegsmarine battlegroup in Norway to mount a successful operation had been markedly reduced. This was particularly so after September, when the *Tirpitz* was put out of action by underwater charges laid by British midget submarines.

It was up to the *Scharnhorst* and a handful of destroyers to harry the Arctic convoys, and to salvage the honour of the Kriegsmarine. By contrast, the Home Fleet had over half a year to prepare for its convoy operations, and it was fully prepared for what lay ahead. In the campaign that followed, the *Scharnhorst* may have been a powerful battleship, but the odds were stacked against her. Not only did the Home Fleet enjoy a numerical advantage, its commander, Admiral Fraser, was also privy to any relevant Ultra intelligence reports, thanks to the breaking of the German naval codes. Now, in any battle that lay ahead, he would know when *Scharnhorst* put to sea, and could divert the convoy out of her path. More importantly, when this was combined with his fleet's advantage in radar, it raised the possibility that the *Scharnhorst* could be lured into battle, and then engaged by superior British forces before she had a chance to escape. That basic idea lay behind what would become the critical naval operation of the long-running Arctic campaign.

CHRONOLOGY

1939

7 January	*Scharnhorst* enters service.
3 September	Britain and France at war with Germany.
21–27 November	Attempted Atlantic sortie by *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*.

1940

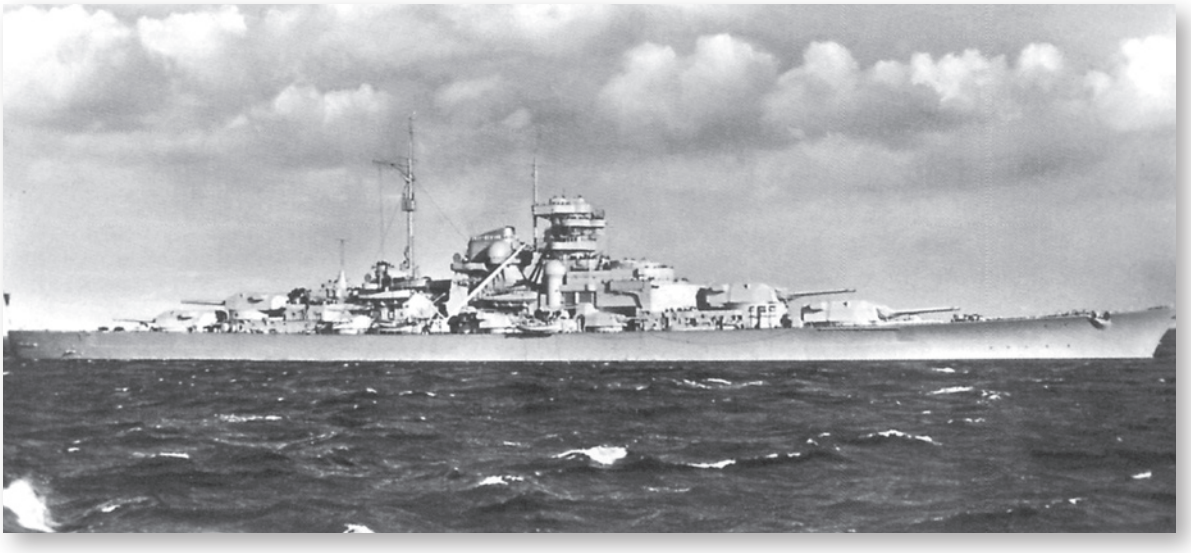
18–20 February	*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* sortie into the North Sea.
28 February	*Duke of York* launched in Clydebank.
April–June	Operation *Weserübung* – the German invasion of Norway.
9 April	*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* engage the battlecruiser *Renown*.
8 June	*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* sink the carrier *Glorious*.
July	*Scharnhorst* undergoes repairs in Kiel.

1941

22 January	Operation *Berlin* commences – Atlantic sortie by *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*.
22 March	*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* reach Brest.
27 May	*Bismarck* sunk in action.
24 July	*Scharnhorst* badly damaged by air attack.
4 November	*Duke of York* enters service.

1942

11–13 February	Operation *Cerberus* – *Scharnhorst* participates in the 'Channel Dash' from Brest to Kiel.
26 February	*Gneisenau* badly damaged by air attack. Subsequently decommissioned.
June	*Scharnhorst* undergoes repairs, and is then sent to Baltic for working-up trials.
31 December	The Battle of the Barents Sea.



The sinking of *Bismarck* in May 1941 led to a major re-evaluation of German naval strategy. Until then, the Kriegsmarine's powerful surface ships were primarily used as commerce raiders. The loss of *Bismarck* demonstrated the dangers of operating far from friendly bases.

1943

January	*Scharnhorst* deployed to Norway.
15 January	Grossadmiral Erich Raeder resigns as head of the Kriegsmarine, and is replaced by Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz.
8 May	*Duke of York* becomes new flagship of Home Fleet.
22 September	Operation *Source* – *Tirpitz* badly damaged by midget submarines.
1 November	Resumption of Arctic convoys.
12 December	Convoy JW 55A sails from Loch Ewe.
	Force 1 sails from Scapa Flow, in support of Convoy JW 55A.
18 December	Force 1 leaves the Kola Inlet.
19 December	Dönitz pledges to Hitler that *Scharnhorst* will attack the next outbound convoy.
20 December	Convoy JW 55B sails from Loch Ewe.
22 December	Convoy spotted by German aircraft to the west of Narvik.
23 December	Force 1 sails from Iceland.
25 December	Commencement of Operation *Ostfront* – *Scharnhorst* sails from the Altenfjord.
26 December	0700hrs: German destroyers detached from *Scharnhorst* to hunt for convoy.
	0830hrs: *Scharnhorst* detected by Force 1.
	0924–0940hrs: First clash between *Scharnhorst* and Force 1 – *Scharnhorst* breaks contact.
	1027hrs: German destroyers ordered to reverse course and abandon search for Allied convoy.
	1210hrs: Force 1 regains radar contact with *Scharnhorst*.
	1224–1247hrs: Second clash between *Scharnhorst* and Force 1 – *Scharnhorst* breaks off the action.
	1250hrs: *Scharnhorst* heads south, pursued by Force 1.
	1300hrs: German destroyers pass within 8 miles of convoy, but no visual contact is made.
	1418hrs: Due to rough weather, German destroyers ordered to return to the Altenfjord.
	1617hrs: Force 2 establishes radar contact with *Scharnhorst*.
	1647hrs: *Duke of York* opens fire on *Scharnhorst*.
	1708hrs: *Scharnhorst* heads east, and draws away from her pursuers.
	1713hrs: British destroyers ordered to carry out torpedo attack, but are unable to overhaul the *Scharnhorst*.
	1820hrs: *Scharnhorst* hit by shell from *Duke of York*, and loses speed.
	1852–1853hrs: Destroyers launch torpedoes at *Scharnhorst*.
	1901hrs: *Duke of York* resumes firing on *Scharnhorst*, from a range of 5 miles.
	1931–1940hrs: Force 2 destroyers launch torpedoes at *Scharnhorst*, as does *Jamaica*.
	1945hrs: *Scharnhorst* sinks – attempts are then made to pick up survivors.

OPPOSING COMMANDERS

THE KRIEGSMARINE

Konteradmiral Erich 'Achmed' Bey (1898–1943), who led the *Scharnhorst*'s battlegroup into action in December 1943, was an experienced naval veteran, and one of the best surviving fleet commanders in the Kriegsmarine. Born in Hamburg, and schooled in a nearby naval academy, he joined the Imperial German Navy in 1916, shortly after the Battle of Jutland. He served on board various cruisers and torpedo boat destroyers during the war, and by its end, he was a Leutnant zur See (junior lieutenant). He remained in the navy after the war when it became the Reichsmarine, and throughout the period of the Weimar Republic, he held a variety of appointments, both at sea (serving mainly in destroyers) and ashore (in training or staff posts). By 1935, when the Reichsmarine was rebranded the Kriegsmarine, he held the rank of Korvettenkapitän (commander). His main focus, though, remained the navy's destroyer force, and when war was declared, he was a Kapitän zur See (captain), and the commander of the 4th Destroyer Flotilla (4.Zerstörer-Flottille).

In the spring of 1940, Bey's ships were committed to the invasion of Norway, and he distinguished himself by his spirited performance at Narvik. On 10 April, his actions led to the sinking of two British destroyers. Three days later, though, when the British returned with a battleship, Bey lost all eight of the remaining destroyers under his command. However, he was regarded as a hero, and so was duly awarded the Knight's Cross. He was also given command of a new formation, the reconstituted 6th Destroyer Flotilla (6.Zerstörer-Flottille), but his real job was as Führer der Zerstörer (Flag Officer, Destroyers). His task was to restore the high morale and efficiency of the navy's depleted destroyer arm. He performed his duties with zeal, and in February 1942, he was given another opportunity to lead his destroyers in action during the Channel Dash. It was Bey's destroyers who escorted the *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* through the English Channel, on their way from Brest to Kiel.

Then, when the bulk of his destroyers were moved to Norwegian waters, Bey went with them, and supervised their deployment in support of the larger warships of

Konteradmiral (Rear Admiral) Bey was reluctant to sortie against Convoy JW 55B, as he considered the weather conditions to be unfavourable. However, Bey was overruled by his superiors. After the battle, he was used as a scapegoat by them, and his own tactical failings were blamed for the loss of his flagship, rather than the shortcomings of the Kriegsmarine's strategy.

the Kriegsmarine's Arctic battlegroup. He was clearly a highly competent destroyer commander, but he was now getting a taste of larger, more complex operations. In March 1943, he was promoted to Konteradmiral (rear admiral), and became the deputy of Vizeadmiral Oskar Kummetz, who commanded the battlegroup, flying his flag in the *Tirpitz*. However, in November, two months after his flagship was badly damaged, Kummetz returned to Germany on sick leave. Grossadmiral Dönitz decided to temporarily promote Bey to command the battlegroup in his stead.

Unfortunately for Bey, most of Kummetz's experienced staff officers had returned home with him. This left Bey with a small and largely inexperienced staff at his disposal. Bey has been criticized for his lack of experience commanding capital ships. This, though, was not an overwhelming handicap. Other wartime commanders reached their positions by similar routes – for instance, Admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham, the celebrated commander of Britain's Mediterranean Fleet, was also a 'destroyer man'. However, Cunningham had highly experienced staff he could draw on for advice. Bey had no such support. This, more than anything, would limit his effectiveness as a battle-group commander.

THE ROYAL NAVY

Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser (1888–1981), the second son of a Victorian general, was born in London and educated at Bradfield College, before he joined the navy and was sent to Dartmouth in September 1902. By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he was a lieutenant, specializing in naval gunnery. As the gunnery officer of the cruiser *Minerva*, he saw action in the Dardanelles and off Gallipoli. In early 1916, he was promoted, and then selected for advanced training at the navy's gunnery school. As a result, he missed the Battle of Jutland. Instead, after training, he was posted as the gunnery officer of the modern battleship *Resolution*. Later, he became her first lieutenant. In 1919, he became a commander, and was sent to Russia, in command of a small naval detachment sent there to help the Whites build up a naval force on the Caspian Sea. He was captured by the Red Army near Baku, and spent six months as a prisoner of war. After his repatriation, he was sent back to the navy's gunnery school as an instructor. By now, he was seen as one of the navy's foremost experts in his field.

This was followed by more staff appointments, including, from 1924 to 1926, as the Chief Gunnery Officer of the Mediterranean Fleet. This was the plum job for a gunnery expert, and Fraser excelled at the task, markedly improving the standards of gunnery within the fleet. On its completion, Fraser was promoted to the rank of

Admiral Fraser, Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, was a man who exuded confidence, despite his quiet and unassuming persona. During the battle, he left his naval uniform in his cabin. Instead, he wore civilian trousers, a polo neck shirt and sweater and a battered admiral's cap.

After his victory at North Cape, Sir Bruce Fraser's acting rank of admiral was made permanent, and he was made a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, while Stalin awarded him the Order of Suvorov. In September 1946, he was offered a baronetcy, and so duly became 1st Baron Fraser of North Cape. Two years later, he became First Sea Lord, and Admiral of the Fleet.

captain, and sent to another staff job in the Admiralty. This involved developing the navy's tactical abilities, and again Fraser proved his worth. It was followed, in 1929, by his first seagoing command – the cruiser *Effingham*, the flagship of the East Indies Station. After his return to Britain in 1932, he became the Admiralty's Director of Naval Ordnance. In this role, one of his tasks was the development and testing of the navy's new 14in. gun. A decade later, he would direct these same guns in action against the *Scharnhorst*. In 1936, he returned to sea, this time as the commander of the aircraft carrier *Glorious*. Four years later, she would be sunk by *Scharnhorst* off the coast of Norway. So, for Fraser, the pursuit of the *Scharnhorst* was a matter of revenge.

He reached flag rank in January 1938, and as a rear admiral he was appointed as the chief of staff to the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, who would go on to become First Sea Lord. Fraser himself was named as Third Sea Lord in early 1939, a post he held until 1942. In 1940, he was also promoted to vice admiral. Finally, after this long spell at the heart of the Admiralty, in mid-1942 Fraser was given another seagoing command, as second-in-command of the Home Fleet. Here he was the deputy to Admiral John Tovey, one of the best naval strategists of the war. When Tovey stepped down from his command in May 1943, Fraser was named as his successor. He received a knighthood, and an acting promotion to admiral, flying his flag in the battleship *Duke of York*. His promotion to admiral was only confirmed two months after his victory off North Cape.

Fraser's long career on various naval staffs gave him a deep understanding of the task that faced him as Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet. He was widely regarded as one of the most intelligent naval commanders of the war, and he encouraged his subordinates to think through the tactics and gunnery challenges that might face them. He was also known for being calm and unruffled, even in a crisis. He was a thorough professional, and a keen advocate of radar-directed gunnery. At North Cape, he was the perfect man for the task in hand. Fraser was a batchelor, and when asked why claimed he was married to the service. He finished the war as the Commander-in-Chief of the British Pacific Fleet, but it was North Cape for which he is best remembered. When he was offered a baronetcy, he chose the title Baron Fraser of North Cape.

Rear Admiral Robert 'Bob' Burnett (1887–1959) was born in Kemnay, Aberdeenshire, the youngest of the four sons of the local laird. He was sent to school in Southsea, and joined the navy when he was 16. By 1911, he was a lieutenant, in charge of the instruction of physical training. During World War I, though, Burnett served in destroyers, and was attached to the Grand Fleet, based in Scapa Flow. He ended the war as a lieutenant-commander, whereupon he resumed his role in physical training, serving as the deputy to the head of the navy's physical training school in Portsmouth, before performing a similar job in the Admiralty. He was promoted to commander in 1923, and two years later, he was given his first command, the sloop *Wallflower*, then serving on the Africa Station. From 1928 to 1930, he was the first lieutenant of the battleship *Rodney*, and in 1931, he was given

promotion to captain and the command of a destroyer flotilla, serving on the China Station. This gave him valuable staff experience, and knowledge of handling formations of warships.

Two shore-based staff appointments followed during the 1930s, first as the Navy's Director of Physical Education, and then as the chief of staff to the commander of the Africa Station. By the time war was declared in September 1939, Burnett was an acting commodore, and the commander of HMS *Pembroke*, the naval barracks in Chatham. During 1940, Burnett was promoted to acting rear admiral, and appointed as the new naval aide-de-camp to King George VI. Apparently, they got on extremely well, but that November, Burnett returned to more active duties, this time as the rear admiral in charge of minelaying, based on board *Southern Prince*, an ocean liner converted into a fast auxiliary minelayer, and based at Kyle of Lochalsh. His flag rank was confirmed the following January. In March 1942, he was placed in command of the Home Fleet's destroyers, and the following January, he was given command of the 10th Cruiser Squadron, flying his flag in the light cruiser *Belfast*.

Burnett, commanding the cruisers of Force 1 from his flagship *Belfast*, was regarded as a tough-fighting commander, and an intuitive tactitian, with a straightforward and no-nonsense approach. Here, he is pictured on the bridge of the destroyer *Faulknor*, talking to Captain Alan K. Scott-Moncrieff.

He saw action during the hard fighting of the summer convoy battles, and again at the Battle of the Barents Sea in December 1942, when he temporarily flew his flag in the light cruiser *Sheffield*. It was Burnett who coordinated the defence of Convoy JW 51B, and the driving away of the *Lützow* and *Admiral Hipper*. He demonstrated his ability to react decisively to a rapidly changing tactical situation, and almost a year later, he was rewarded with another promotion, becoming a vice admiral. He barely had time to have his new ring sewn on when he was called into action again, this time in the defence of Convoy JW 55B, and the pursuit of the *Scharnhorst*. Once again, Burnett acted with alacrity, and by preventing *Scharnhorst* from breaking past his cruisers to reach the convoy, he helped seal the fate of the German battleship. While his superior Admiral Fraser was a thinking admiral, Vice Admiral Burnett freely admitted his intellectual shortcomings, describing himself as a 'clubswinger admiral' – the naval term for a physical training instructor.

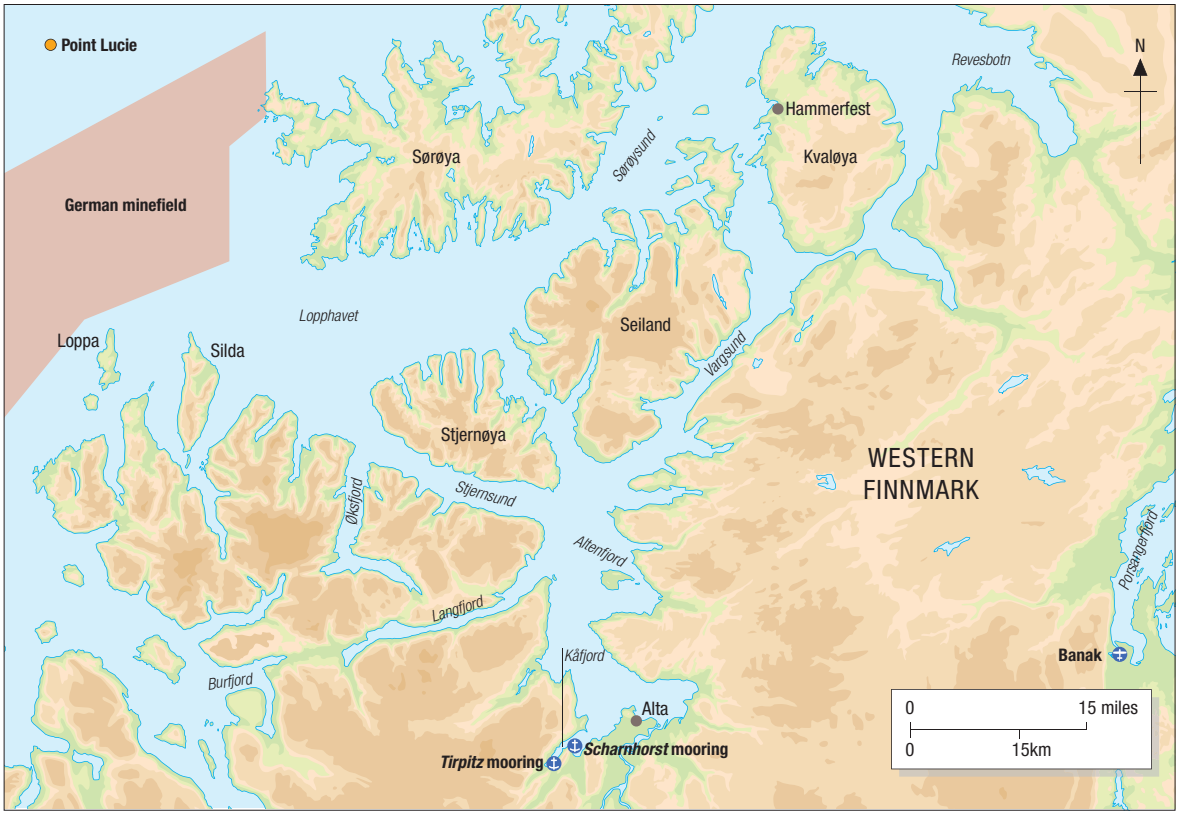
In fact, Burnett was selling himself short. He had an instinctive ability to grasp the tactical situation, and to react accordingly. He could 'read' a naval battle, and even before North Cape he had secured his position as a 'fighting admiral'. 'Bob' was a popular figure among his men, and his confidence was inspiring. Few other commanders would be willing to fight a more powerful enemy with such aggressiveness that the enemy were driven off, more by moral force than by firepower. Burnett achieved this twice – at the Barents Sea and North Cape. Therefore, in December 1943, he was the perfect man to command Force 1, and the ideal counterpoint to the more insightful and cerebral Fraser.

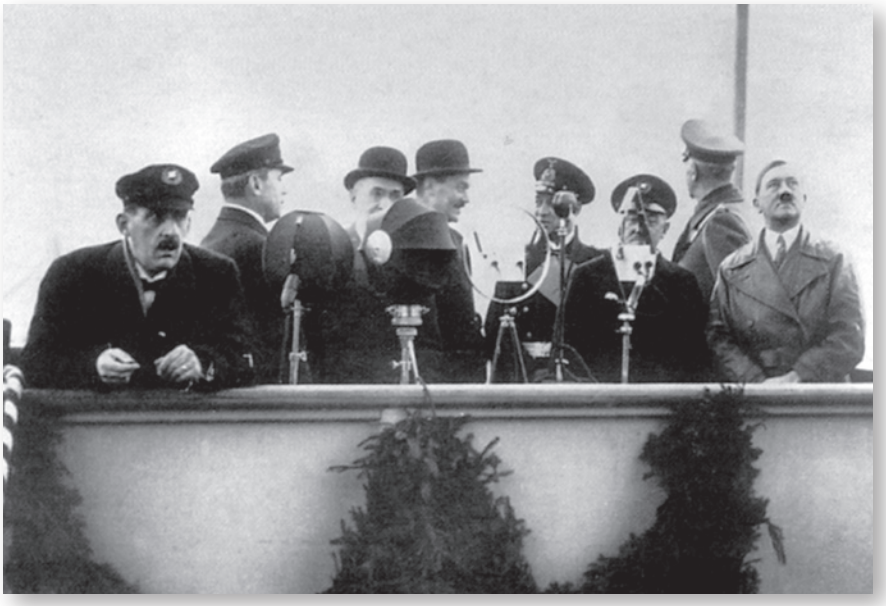
OPPOSING FORCES

THE KRIEGSMARINE

In Germany, *Scharnhorst* was widely regarded as a lucky ship. She had been in action several times, and avoided being drawn into fights as many times again. During her wartime career, she had been mined and torpedoed, most notably during the Channel Dash of February 1942, but this did not seem to damage her lucky image. By contrast, her sister ship *Gneisenau* was not so fortunate. Even though the two battleships usually operated together, it was *Gneisenau* that seemed to come off the worst of the two. Having reached

The Altenfjord





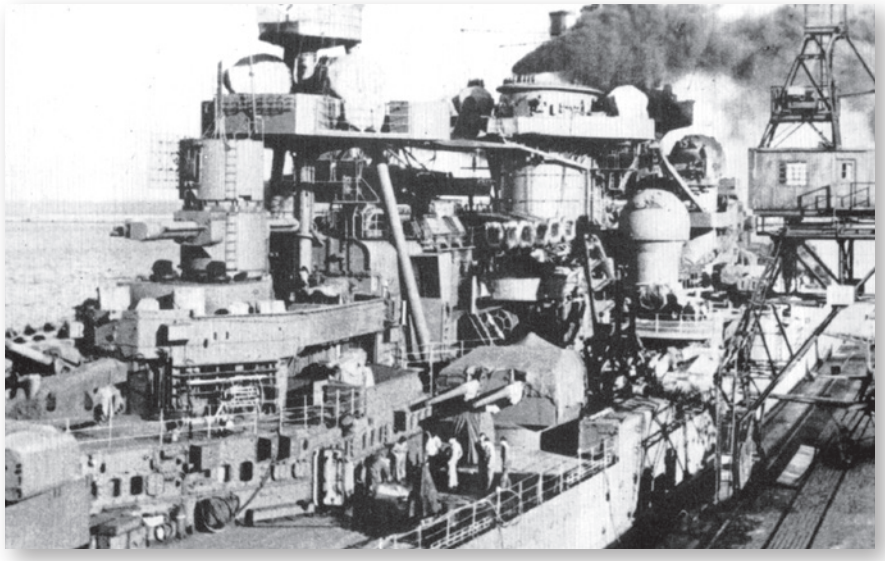
Scharnhorst was launched in Wilhelmshaven on 3 October 1936. The ceremony was attended by Adolf Hitler and other high-ranking officials, as well as Grossadmiral Raeder, commander of the Kriegsmarine.

The commissioning ceremony of *Scharnhorst* took place in Wilhelmshaven on 7 January 1939. There, Kapitän zur See Otto Ciliax became her first commanding officer, and took her to sea, to supervise her sea trials and working up. Here, Ciliax can be seen addressing the crew, from a podium erected on top of Caesar turret.

Kiel after the Channel Dash, she was so badly damaged in an Allied air raid that she was decommissioned. Instead, her guns were used for coastal defence. By contrast, *Scharnhorst* had been damaged during her passage from Brest to Kiel, but she could be repaired. The battleship's motto was *Scharnhorst immer voran!* (*Scharnhorst* ever onwards!), which, for her crew, came to offer the reassuring notion that whatever the danger, *Scharnhorst* would always make it home.

Like the *Duke of York*, *Scharnhorst* was the result of a political compromise. She was laid down in May 1935, at a time when the Führer and Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler was rejecting the constraints placed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles (1919). He wanted to rebuild the German Navy – now restyled the Kriegsmarine – but he could not do so in the face of international opinion. So, the Kriegsmarine's first proper battleships were designed to conform to the weight and gun-calibre restrictions of the naval disarmament treaties agreed between the world's naval powers. A month after *Scharnhorst* was laid down, the German right to build such ships was ratified by the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. Officially, these new battleships had to displace fewer than 35,000 tons. The decision was made to arm them with nine 28cm (11in.) guns, in three triple turrets.

These were similar to the guns and turrets mounted in the *Panzerschiffe* (armoured ships) built during the early 1930s. This meant that the guns and mountings were easily produced.

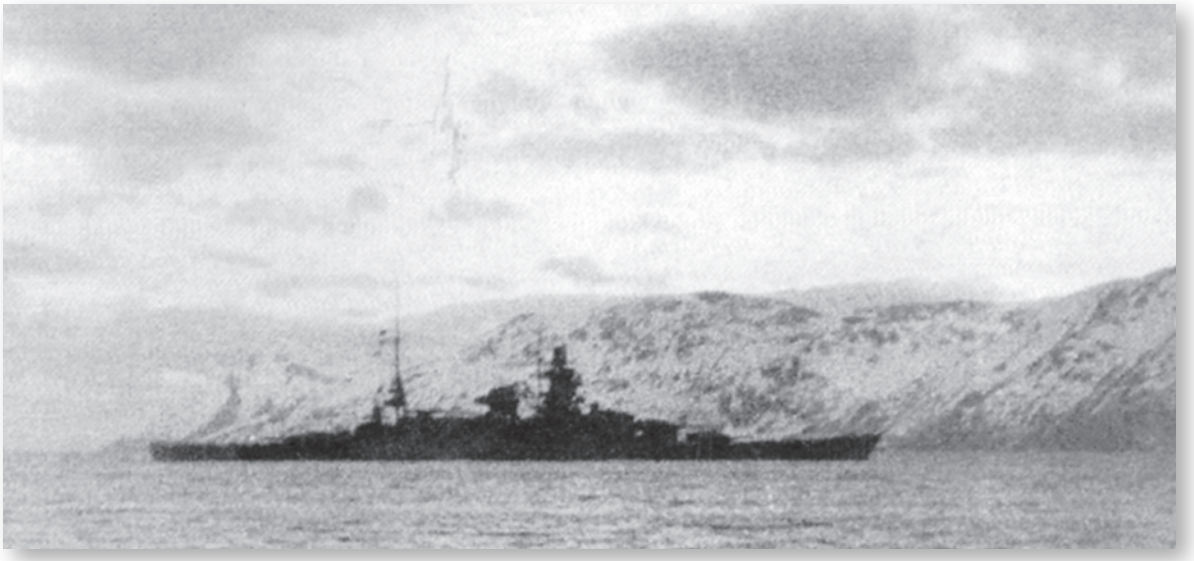


The *Scharnhorst*, pictured about to get under way from the quayside in Gotenhafen (now Gdynia), during her working-up period in late 1939. Her forward rangefinder is clearly visible, mounted above her bridge, just forward of her foremast.

While the Kriegsmarine really wanted them to carry more powerful 38cm (15in.) guns, the idea was that these would be fitted at a later stage. Instead, the outbreak of war overtook these plans, and so *Scharnhorst* retained her original 28cm guns. Officially, the British described her as a battlecruiser, as that is how she was portrayed by the Germans. Typically, a battlecruiser had less armour than a regular battleship, as the balance of firepower, speed and protection was tipped in favour of the first two elements, at the expense of the third one. In the case of the *Scharnhorst* class, though, their relatively light main guns meant that more emphasis could be placed on armour. The result was a battleship which was extremely fast – more so than any battleship in the British fleet – but also well protected, and with a fairly effective level of firepower.

Unlike the *Duke of York*, though, *Scharnhorst* was not really designed to fight another battleship. She would do so if she was forced to, but the Kriegsmarine built her primarily as a commerce raider. Her job was to harry the enemy's maritime supply lines, and generally to avoid a stand-up fight. She could rely on her speed and protection to keep her out of trouble. After the sinking of the *Bismarck* in May 1941, the Kriegsmarine abandoned this policy of commerce raiding using its capital ships. However, this

After her sea trials, *Scharnhorst* returned to Wilhelmshaven in mid-1939 to have her bow remodelled, and her old straight version replaced by a more graceful 'clipper' bow, which improved her seakeeping qualities. This picture of her was taken in early 1940, in between two sorties into the North Sea.



The *Scharnhorst*, pictured in the Altenfjord in northern Norway in early 1943. She reached this remote anchorage in late March, and it remained her base until her final sortie in December 1943. Here, the battleship was well protected from enemy naval or air attacks.

was resurrected in a more limited way when they needed surface ships to disrupt the sailings of the Arctic convoys. The drawback, though, in terms of operational capabilities was that thanks to Hitler's directives, the Kriegsmarine also had to adopt a policy of minimal risk. So, powerful surface ships like *Scharnhorst* and *Tirpitz* tended to be kept out of danger, and only sortied when their chances of success were seen to be completely favourable.

In 1943, *Scharnhorst* formed part of a powerful German battlegroup stationed in the Altenfjord, near the northernmost tip of Norway. As well as *Scharnhorst*, this included the powerful battleship *Tirpitz* – sister of the *Bismarck* – as well as the armoured cruiser *Lützow* and several destroyers. However, by December, *Lützow* had returned to Germany for repairs, while *Tirpitz* had been badly damaged in a daring attack by British midget submarines. As several destroyers were needed to escort *Lützow* to the Baltic, only five fully operational destroyers remained available to this much-reduced battlegroup. These, though, were all powerful assets. German destroyers were much larger than their British counterparts, and carried 15cm (5.9in.) guns, which gave them a real edge in terms of firepower. However, these heavy guns also hampered their seakeeping qualities, particularly in rough seas. Ultimately, this limited their ability to support the *Scharnhorst* off North Cape.

The U-boats based in Norway were a more reliable asset available to the Kriegsmarine's battle-group commander. These operated in a wolfpack, Gruppe Eisenbart, and during the coming campaign they served two purposes. They could be used to attack the Arctic convoys, but they could also act as a reconnaissance screen, to report any sighting of Allied warships that might threaten a German surface sortie. The seven operational U-boats of the wolfpack were all Type VIIC boats, which were designed to operate on the surface, and only dived during an attack, or when under threat. All but one of these boats were built during 1942–43, and carried 14 torpedoes, fired through four bow and one stern tube. A less reliable form of support was the Luftwaffe. While it maintained several air bases in northern Norway, the German air force was not particularly enthusiastic about supporting naval operations. So, while it frequently conducted its own search and reconnaissance missions,

SCHARNHORST AT ANCHOR IN THE KÅFJORD, SEPTEMBER 1943 (PP. 22–23)

In January 1943, the battleship *Scharnhorst* (**1**) was sent to northern Norway, and moored in the Kåfjord, a branch of the larger Altenfjord. Her usual mooring was near the entrance to the smaller fjord, tucked behind the promontory of Auskarnes (**2**). The mooring itself was protected by a double line of anti-torpedo nets, which were suspended from lines of buoys (**3**), and which formed three sides of a larger rectangular box, some 300m long and 60m wide. A third line of nets was added to the starboard or north-western side. The fourth side of the box was made up of a single line of nets, which could be opened and closed by the boom vessel shown here (**4**). *Scharnhorst* is shown in the simple contrast camouflage scheme she bore from the summer of 1943 until her loss at the Battle of North Cape.

Further to the east lay a second protected mooring, which usually housed the armoured cruiser *Lützow* (**5**). Anchored nearby was the flakship *Nymphe* (**6**, formerly the Norwegian coastal defence ship *Tordenskjold*), and a varying number of destroyers. Further down the small fjord, to the south-west, was a third protected mooring, which was used by the battleship *Tirpitz*. Between the tip of the Auskarnes Peninsula and the far side of the Kåfjord was another double line of nets, designed to prevent passage by enemy submarines. It too was served by a mobile boom. Across the Kåfjord lay Hjemmeluft (**7**).

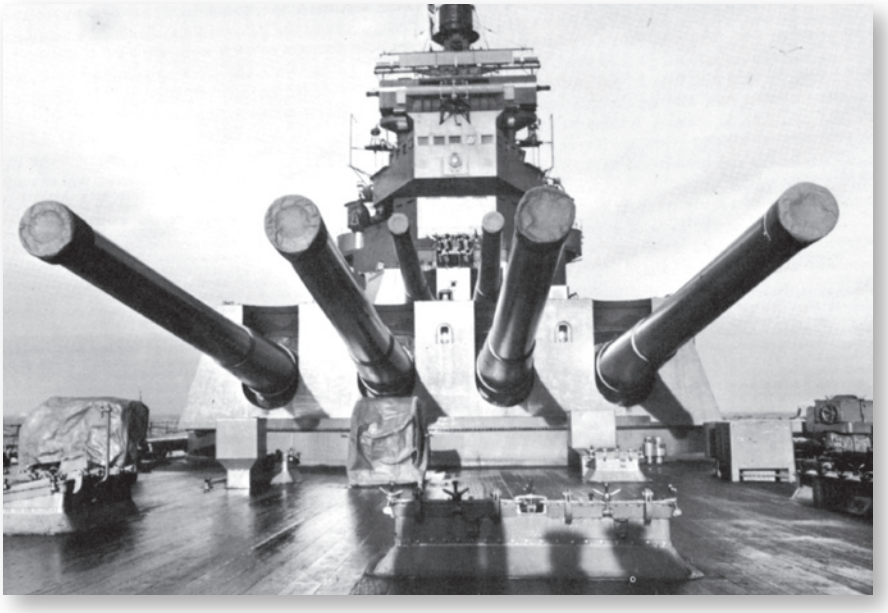
In September 1943, British midget submarines attacked the anchorage, and *Tirpitz* was badly damaged. *Scharnhorst* and *Lützow* were at sea at the time, and so were spared a similar fate. After that, *Scharnhorst* was moved to the nearby Langfjord, which was considered a better-protected position.

and carried out highly effective attacks on the Arctic convoys, there was little meaningful coordination between the two services.

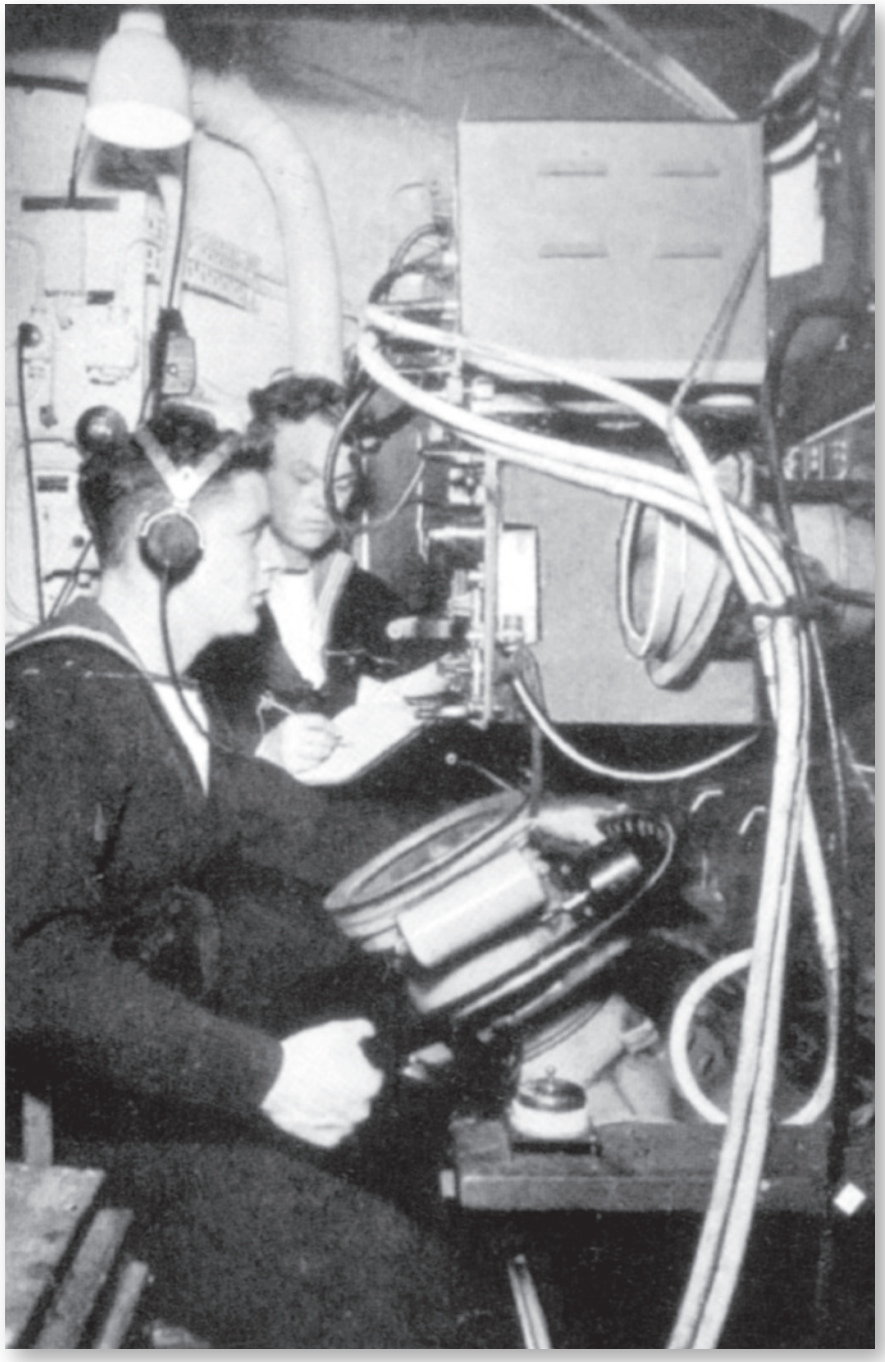
THE ROYAL NAVY

Admiral Fraser, the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, flew his flag in *Duke of York*, a King George V-class battleship carrying ten 14in. guns. She was usually based in Scapa Flow, where her mooring buoy was provided with a secure telephone line that allowed Fraser and his staff to communicate directly with the Admiralty in London. At the start of December 1943, she was one of seven capital ships in the fleet's wartime anchorage, the others being her sister ships *King George V* and *Anson*, the two Nelson-class battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney*, the Free French battlecruiser *Richelieu*, and the aircraft carrier *Furious*. He could call on other capital ships, too – battleships or carriers that were on detachment, carrying out other missions or completing refits. For instance, on 7 December, *King George V* sailed for Gibraltar, to bring the prime minister back from the Tehran Conference. So, the fleet was stretched thinly that winter, especially after the resumption of the Arctic convoys.

Despite the unusual calibre of their guns, the *Duke of York* and her sisters were powerful modern battleships. They were primarily designed to fight other battleships, and at their maximum elevation of 40° their guns had a range of 36,000 yards (18 miles). Their design was the result of a compromise, brought about by the constraints of the naval treaties agreed during the interwar years. So, while the Admiralty would have preferred 15in. or 16in. guns, the smaller calibre was a political compromise. The trade-off was that they were well protected by a thick armoured belt, which was considered adequate protection against German 380cm (15in.) guns. Almost as importantly, compared to the earlier battleships in the British battlefleet, the King George V-class ships were fitted with modern gunnery



The 14in. guns mounted in the battleships of the King George V class were unproven when they first entered service in 1940, and both the guns and their turrets were plagued with problems. However, by late 1943 the latter had been overcome, and these weapons were regarded as both accurate and reliable.



By 1943, the Royal Navy enjoyed a marked advantage over the Kriegsmarine in terms of radar. During the Battle of North Cape, the search radars installed in the larger British warships were capable of detecting *Scharnhorst* long before they themselves could be detected by the German battleship.

direction equipment, supported by a fire control table that was, in effect, a powerful analog computer. The *Duke of York* was also capable of firing her guns using radar guidance. This proved a crucial factor in the battle against the *Scharnhorst*.

While the *Duke of York* and these other battleships formed the core of the battle fleet, they were not used to directly support the convoys. That job fell to less prestigious warships – minesweepers, corvettes and destroyers. By this stage of the war, the British had developed a standard design of medium-

sized 'War Emergency Plan' destroyer, which could be built quickly. While these ships lacked the firepower of their German counterparts, they were designed primarily to escort convoys, or to use their torpedoes to attack the enemy. The destroyers that took part in the battle fought off North Cape that December were two variants of these, but essentially they were interchangeable in terms of role and capability. Their strength was that while they could be used for convoy protection, they could also be detached and used in a more aggressive role. Their 21in. Mark IX torpedoes carried an explosive charge of 805 lb (365kg), and their propulsion system gave them a range of around 11,000 yards, at 36 knots. These were used to good effect against the *Scharnhorst*.

While battleships like *Duke of York* provided distant cover for the convoys, and destroyers and smaller warships gave them close cover, the Home Fleet's cruiser force had an extremely valuable role midway between the two. During this campaign, Vice Admiral Burnett's close cover force consisted of the heavy cruiser *Norfolk*, and the light cruisers *Belfast* and *Sheffield*. A fourth cruiser, *Jamaica*, accompanied the fleet flagship. Of course, there were more cruisers in the Home Fleet. Earlier that December, Admiral Fraser had five heavy cruisers under his command, all of the 1st Cruiser Squadron. Of these, *Kent* and *Berwick* were in Scapa Flow, but *Cumberland*, *Devonshire* and *London* were in refit in Tyneside and Rosyth. Similarly, apart from Burnett's two light cruisers of the 10th Cruiser Squadron, the others – *Bermuda*, *Nigeria*, *Scylla* and the Polish *Dragon* – were all undergoing refits. Three more – *Black Prince*, *Bellona* and *Ajax* – were working up (crew training) in Scapa Flow, and were not considered fully operational.

So, Fraser had to make do with Burnett's small force. The *Norfolk* was armed with eight 8in. guns, but as a County-class cruiser, she was built between the wars for commerce protection. She was not really designed for fighting a duel with powerful enemy warships. The *Belfast*, *Sheffield* and *Jamaica* were all modern 6in. cruisers, each armed with 12 6in. guns. All three of these ships were of different classes and designs, but essentially they were all similar enough in terms of their capability. Their 6in. guns had a high rate of fire, and it was hoped that this level of firepower would help drive off any German attack against a convoy. While this had worked perfectly well at the Battle of the Barents Sea the previous year, in 1943 Burnett's cruisers were facing the *Scharnhorst*, which was a far more deadly opponent. Their one advantage over their adversary was their radar – capable of detecting the *Scharnhorst*, and then using radar fire control to engage her in the dark.

This radar capability gave the Home Fleet a real edge. Taking *Duke of York* as one example, she carried a Type 281 air search radar to detect approaching aircraft, as well as a Type 273QR surface search radar to detect enemy surface ships. Moreover, all her various gun batteries had fire control radars associated with them – the Type 284 for her 14in. guns, Type 285 for her secondary battery and an IFF receiver, which could detect friend from foe. This gave *Duke of York* the capability to detect the enemy beyond normal visual range, and then to fire on her, even if her target was not visible. In the battle, *Duke of York*'s Type 273 set detected *Scharnhorst* at a range of nearly 23 nautical miles. Burnett's cruisers, as well as *Jamaica* and the destroyers, all carried radar. All the British cruisers had Type 273 and 281 sets of their own, as well as their own fire control radars, as did most of the destroyers. All of these outperformed the radar fitted in *Scharnhorst*.

ORDER OF BATTLE

KRIEGSMARINE

KMS *SCHARNHORST* (KAPITÄN ZUR SEE FRITZ HINTZE)

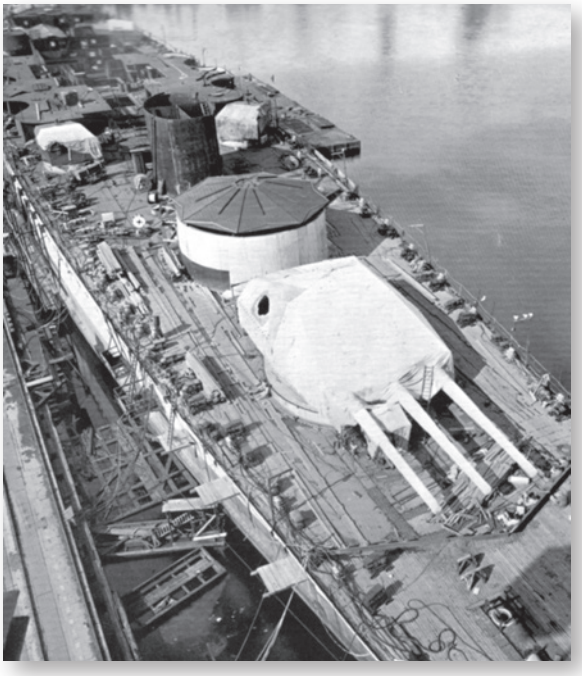
Scharnhorst-class battleship; flagship of Konteradmiral Bey

4TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA (KAPITÄN ZUR SEE ROLF JOHANNESSON)

Z-29 (1936A Narvik-class destroyer) (Korvettenkapitän Theodor von Mutius); flagship of Kapitän zur See Johannesson
Z-30 (1936A Narvik-class destroyer) (Korvettenkapitän Karl Lampe)
Z-33 (1936A (Mob) Narvik-class destroyer) (Korvettenkapitän Erich Holtorf)
Z-34 (1936A (Mob) Narvik-class destroyer) (Korvettenkapitän Karl Hetz)
Z-38 (1936A (Mob) Narvik-class destroyer) (Korvettenkapitän Gerfried Brutzner)

GRUPPE EISENBART

Wolfpack controlled and coordinated by Kapitän zur See Rudolf Peters, Führer der U-boote Norwegen (Commander, U-boat forces, Norway), based ashore in Narvik.
U-277 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Kapitänleutnant Robert Lübsen)
U-314 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Korvettenkapitän Georg-Wilhelm Basse)
U-354 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Korvettenkapitän Karl-Heinz Herbschleb)
U-387 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Korvettenkapitän Rudolf Büchler)
U-601 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Kapitänleutnant Otto Hansen)
U-716 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Oberleutnant zur See Hans Dunkelberg)
U-957 (Type VIIC U-boat) (Kapitänleutnant Gerhard Schaar)



Scharnhorst, pictured here being fitted out in Wilhelmshaven in 1937, was armed with 28cm (11in.) guns, mounted in three triple turrets. The intention was that these would eventually be replaced by 38cm (15in.) ones in the same mounts, but this improvement was never made.

ROYAL NAVY

HOME FLEET (ADMIRAL BRUCE FRASER)

Force 1 (Vice Admiral Robert Burnett)
HMS *Belfast* (Edinburgh-class light cruiser) (Captain Frederick Parham); flag of Vice Admiral Burnett
HMS *Norfolk* (Norfolk-class heavy cruiser) (Captain Donald Bain)
HMS *Sheffield* (Southampton-class light cruiser) (Captain Charles Addis)
Force 2 (Admiral Bruce Fraser)
HMS *Duke of York* (King George V-class battleship) (Captain The Hon. Guy Russell); flag of Admiral Fraser
HMS *Jamaica* (Colony-class light cruiser) (Captain John Hughes-Hallett)
36th Destroyer Division (Commander Ralph Fisher)
1st Sub-Division
HMS *Savage* (S-class destroyer) (Commander Michael Meyrick)
HMS *Saumarez* (S-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Eric Walmsey)
2nd Sub-Division
HMS *Scorpion* (S-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander William Clouston)
HMNoS *Stord* (S-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Skule Storheill) – Royal Norwegian Navy
71st Sub-Division
HMS *Musketeer* (L/M-class destroyer) (Commander Ralph Fisher); flag, 36th Division
HMS *Matchless* (L/M-class destroyer) (Lieutenant William Shaw)
72nd Sub-Division
HMS *Opportune* (O/P-class destroyer) (Commander John Lee-Barber)
HMS *Virago* (V-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Archibald White)
Convoy JW 55B (19 merchant ships; Loch Ewe to Kola Inlet)
SS *Bernard N. Baker* (US)
SS *British Statesman* (UK)
SS *Brockholst Livingston* (US)
SS *Cardinal Gibbons* (US)
SS *Fort Kullyspell* (UK)
SS *Fort Nakasley* (UK)
SS *Fort Vercheres* (UK)
SS *Harold L. Winslow* (US)
SS *John J. Abel* (US)
SS *John Vining* (US)
SS *John Wanamaker* (US)
SS *Norlys* (Panama)
SS *Ocean Gypsy* (UK)
SS *Ocean Messenger* (UK)
SS *Ocean Pride* (UK)
SS *Ocean Viceroy* (UK)
SS *Ocean Valour* (UK)
SS *Thomas U. Walter* (US)
SS *Will Rogers* (US)
Local Escort (accompanying the convoy as far as 64° North)
HMS *Hound* (Algerine-class minesweeper)
HMS *Hydra* (Algerine-class minesweeper)
HMS *Wallflower* (Flower-class corvette)
HMS *Borage* (Flower-class corvette)
Through Escort (Lieutenant-Commander Frank Hewitt)
HMS *Gleaner* (Halcyon-class minesweeper) (Lieutenant-Commander Frank Hewitt)
HMS *Whitehall* (modified W-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Patrick Cowell)
HMS *Wrestler* (modified W-class destroyer) (Lieutenant Robert Lacon)
HMS *Honeysuckle* (Flower-class corvette) (Lieutenant Henry MacKilligan)

HMS *Oxslip* (Flower-class corvette) (Lieutenant-Commander Charles Ledbetter)

Fighting Destroyer Escort (Captain James 'Bes' McCoy)

HMS *Onslow* (O/P-class destroyer) (Captain James McCoy)
HMS *Haida* (Tribal-class destroyer) (Commander Henry de Wolf)
HMCS *Huron* (Tribal-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Herbert Rayner) – Royal Canadian Navy
HMCS *Impulsive* (G/H/I-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Philip Bekenn) – Royal Canadian Navy
HMCS *Iroquois* (Tribal-class destroyer) (Commander James Hibberd) – Royal Canadian Navy
HMS *Onslaught* (O/P-class destroyer) (Commander William Selby)
HMS *Orwell* (O/P-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander John Hodges)
HMS *Scourge* (S-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander George Balfour)

Convoy RA 55A (23 merchant ships; Kola Inlet to Loch Ewe)

SS *Arthur L. Perry* (US)
SS *Daniel Drake* (US)
SS *Edmund Fanning* (US)
SS *Empire Carpenter* (UK)
SS *Empire Celia* (UK)
SS *Empire Nigel* (UK)
SS *Fort McMurray* (UK)
SS *Fort Yukon* (UK)
SS *Gilbert Stuart* (US)
SS *Henry Villard* (US)
SS *James Smith* (US)
SS *Junecrest* (UK)
SS *Mijdrecht* (Netherlands)
SS *Ocean Strength* (UK)
SS *Open Vanity* (UK)
SS *Ocean Verity* (UK)
SS *Park Holland* (US)
SS *Rathlin* (UK)
SS *San Adolfo* (Brazil)
SS *Thomas Kearns* (US)
SS *Thomas Sim Lee* (US)
SS *William L. Marcy* (US)
SS *William Windom* (US)

Through Escort (Lieutenant-Commander Richard Ellis)

HMS *Seagull* (Halcyon-class minesweeper) (Lieutenant-Commander Richard Ellis)
HMNoS *Andenes* (Flower-class corvette) (Lieutenant-Commander Erlend Bruun) – Royal Norwegian Navy
HMS *Dianella* (Flower-class corvette) (Lieutenant Leonard Tognola)
HMS *Poppy* (Flower-class corvette) (Lieutenant Denzil Onslow)

Fighting Destroyer Escort (Captain Ian 'Scotty' Campbell)

HMS *Milne* (L/M-class destroyer) (Captain Ian Campbell)
HMS *Ashanti* (Tribal-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander John Barnes)
HMCS *Athabaskan* (Tribal-class destroyer) (Commander John Stubbs) – Royal Canadian Navy
HMS *Beagle* (A/B-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Norman Murch)
HMS *Meteor* (L/M-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Dermod Jewitt)
HMS *Wescott* (W-class destroyer) (Lieutenant-Commander Hedworth Lambton)

SHIP SPECIFICATIONS

KRIEGSMARINE

KMS *Scharnhorst* (Scharnhorst-class battleship)

Commissioned	January 1939
Displacement	34,841 tons (standard)
Dimensions	length: 753ft 11in. (229.8m), beam: 98ft 5in. (30m), draught: 27ft (8.23m)
Maximum speed	32 knots
Armament	nine 28cm (11in.) guns (3x3), 12 15cm (6in.) guns (4x2, 2x1), 14 10.5cm (4.1in.) guns (7x2), 16 3.7cm AA guns (8x2), eight 2cm AA guns (8x1)
Armour	belt: 6.75–13.75in., deck: 2–3in., turrets: 14in. (front), 6in. (sides and rear), conning tower: 13.75in.
Aircraft	two Ar-196 float planes, one catapult
Complement	1,840

Type 1936A Narvik-class destroyers (*Z-29*, *Z-30*, *Z-33*, *Z-34* and *Z-38*)

Commissioned	July 1941–June 1943
Displacement	2,603 tons (*Z-29* and *Z-30*: 3,079 tons)
Dimensions	length: 416ft 8in. (127m), beam: 39ft 4in. (12m), draught: 12ft 10in. (3.9m)
Maximum speed	36 knots (*Z-29* and *Z-30*: 38 knots)
Armament	four 15cm (5.9in.) guns (4x1), four 3.7cm AA guns (2x2), six 2cm AA guns (6x1), eight 53.3cm (21.7in.) torpedo tubes (2x4) (*Z-29* as above, but 15cm guns mounted as 1x2, 3x1, 12 3.7cm AA guns [4x2, 4x1], and 18 2cm AA guns [4x4, 2x1])
Armour	none
Aircraft	not carried
Complement	315–321

ROYAL NAVY

HMS *Duke of York* (King George V-class battleship)

Commissioned	November 1941
Displacement	38,031 tons (standard)
Dimensions	length: 745ft (227m), beam: 103ft (31.4m), draught: 29ft (8.8m)
Maximum speed	28 knots
Armament	ten 14in. guns (2x4, 1x2), 16 5.25in. guns (8x2), 32 2-pdr pom-poms (4x8)
Armour	belt: 15in., deck: 2–6in., turrets: 12.75in. (front), 6.75–8.75in. (sides and rear), conning tower: 4in.
Aircraft	two Walrus float planes, one catapult
Complement	1,543

HMS *Norfolk* (Norfolk-class heavy cruiser)

Commissioned	April 1940
Displacement	10,900 tons (standard)
Dimensions	length: 635ft 5in. (193.67m), beam: 66ft (20.12m), draught: 22ft 8in. (6.37m)
Maximum speed	32 knots
Armament	eight 8in. guns (4x2), four 4in. guns (4x2), four 2-pdr pom-poms (1x4), eight 21in. torpedo tubes (2x4)
Armour	belt: 4.5in over magazines, 1in. elsewhere, deck: 1.5in., turrets: 1in., conning tower: 1in.
Aircraft	one Walrus float plane, one catapult
Complement	710

HMS *Belfast* (Edinburgh-class light cruiser)

Commissioned	August 1939
Displacement	10,550 tons (standard)

Dimensions	length: 613ft 6in. (186.99m), beam: 66ft 4in. (20.22m), draught: 23ft 2in. (7.06m)
Maximum speed	32.5 knots
Armament	12 6in. guns (4x3), 12 4in. guns (6x2), 16 2-pdr pom-poms (2x8), six 21in. torpedo tubes (2x3)
Armour	belt: 4.5in., deck: 2–3in., turrets: 4in. (front), 2in. (sides and rear), conning tower: 2in.
Aircraft	not carried
Complement	850

HMS *Sheffield* (Southampton-class light cruiser)

Commissioned	August 1937
Displacement	9,100 tons (standard)
Dimensions	length: 591ft 6in. (180.28m), beam: 61ft 8in. (18.79m), draught: 21ft 6in. (6.55m)
Maximum speed	32 knots
Armament	12 6in. guns (4x3), eight 4in. guns (4x2), eight 2-pdr pom-poms (2x4), six 21in. torpedo tubes (2x3)
Armour	belt: 4.5in. over magazines, 1in. elsewhere, deck: 1–2in., turrets: 1in., conning tower: 1in.
Aircraft	not carried
Complement	748

HMS *Jamaica* (Fiji-class light cruiser)

Commissioned	May 1940
Displacement	8,530 tons (standard)
Dimensions	length: 555ft 6in. (169.31m), beam: 62ft (18.9m), draught: 20ft 4in. (6.2m)
Maximum speed	31.5 knots
Armament	12 6in. guns (4x3), eight 4in. guns (4x2), eight 2-pdr pom-poms (2x4), six 21in. torpedo tubes (2x3)
Armour	belt: 4.5in. over magazines, 1in. elsewhere, deck: 1–2in., turrets: 1in., conning tower: 1in.
Aircraft	not carried
Complement	920

M-class and O-class destroyers (*Matchless*, *Musketeer* and *Opportune*)

Commissioned	February 1942–September 1942
Displacement	1,920 tons
	Opportune: 1,610 tons
Dimensions	length: 362ft 6in. (110.5m), beam: 37ft (11.2m), draught: 10ft (3m)
	Opportune: length: 345ft (105m), beam: 35ft (10.6m), draught: 9ft (2.74m)
Maximum speed	36 knots
Armament	six 4.7in. guns (3x2), four 2-pdr pom-pom AA guns (1x4), eight 0.5in. MGs (1x4), eight 21in. torpedo tubes (2x4)
	Opportune: four 4.7in. guns (4x1), four 2-pdr pom-pom AA guns (1x4), four 20mm AA guns (4x1), eight 21in. torpedo tubes (2x4)
Armour	none
Aircraft	not carried
Complement	221
	Opportune: 175

S-class and V-class destroyers (*Saumarez*, *Savage*, *Scorpion*, *Stord* and *Virago*)

Commissioned	May 1943–September 1943
Displacement	1,710 tons
	Virago: 1,808 tons
Dimensions	length: 362ft 9in. (110.5m), beam: 35ft 8in. (10.9m), draught: 10ft (3m)
Maximum speed	36 knots
Armament	four 4.7in. guns (4x1), two 40mm AA guns (1x2), four 20mm AA guns (4x1), eight 21in. torpedo tubes (2x4)
Armour	none
Aircraft	not carried
Complement	180

Notes: *Scorpion* never received a twin 40mm gun, but mounted 2x2 20mm AA guns, and four 2-pdr pom-pom AA guns (1x4). Instead of her 4.7in. guns, *Savage* carried four 4.5in. guns (1x2, 2x1), and instead of her twin 40mm and single 20mm AA guns, she carried four 20mm AA guns (2x2). In lieu of her twin 40mm and single 20mm AA guns, *Virago* carried four 2-pdr pom-poms (1x4), and eight 20mm (4x2).

OPPOSING PLANS

THE KRIEGSMARINE

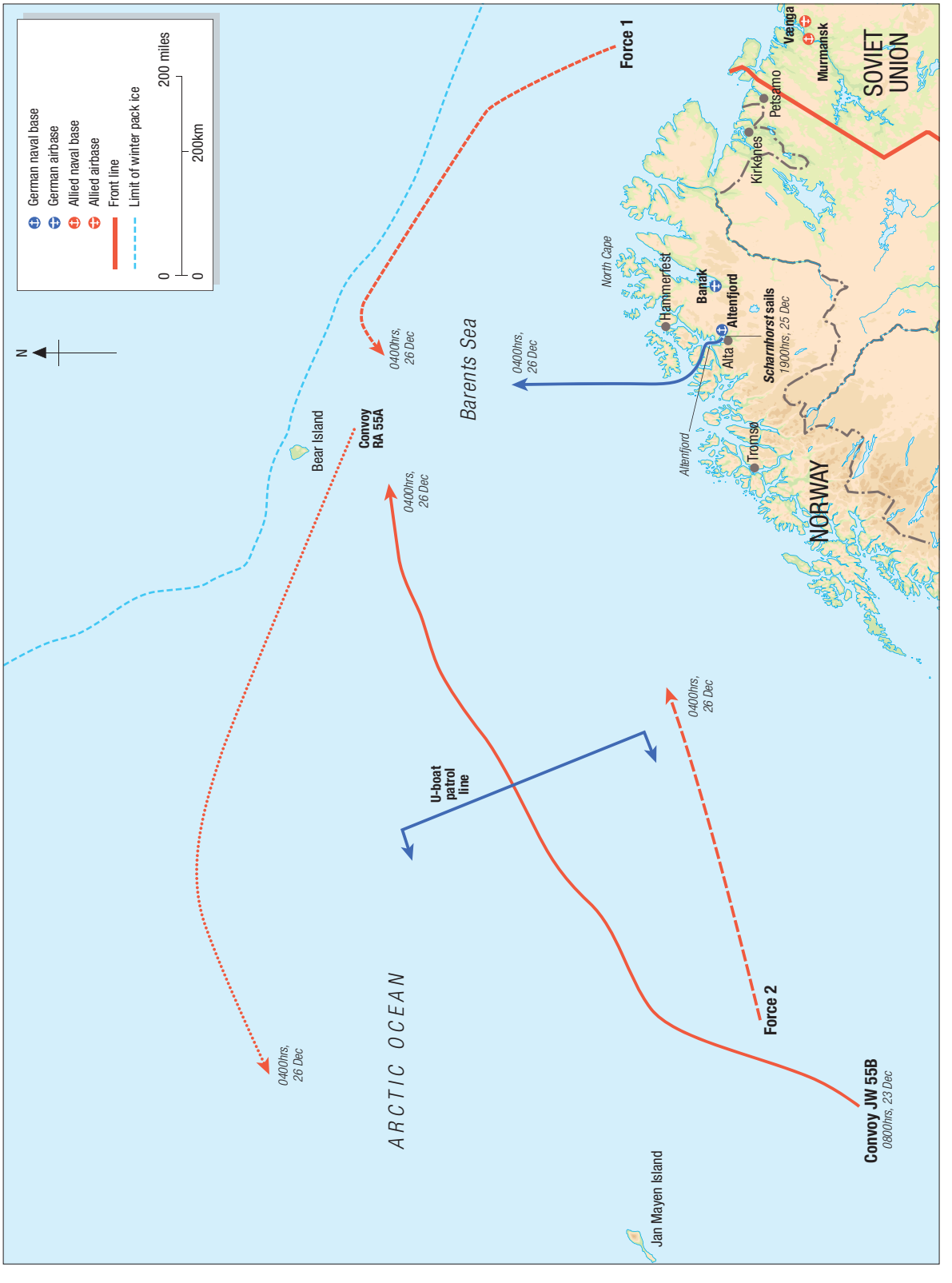
The Arctic convoys resumed on 1 November, when the homeward-bound convoy RA 54A left the Kola Inlet, which connected Murmansk to the Barents Sea. It had passed safely by Norwegian waters before the Germans were aware of it. Similarly, the outward-bound convoy JW 54A reached the Kola Inlet safely on 25 November, without being detected. The next two outward-bound and one homeward-bound convoys also passed through the Barents Sea without incident, although JW 55A was spotted by a U-boat from Gruppe Eisenbart. Kapitän zur See Rudolf Peters, commanding the U-boat group, only had four operational U-boats, and with the short days and rough seas it was lucky they had even managed to spot the convoy, let alone attack it. Meanwhile, *Scharnhorst* and the five destroyers of the 4th Destroyer Flotilla stood in readiness for an order to sortie – an order that never came. Konteradmiral Bey must have felt himself under pressure to make a move.

Meanwhile, as head of the Kriegsmarine, Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz was also being pressured to hinder the flow of supplies to Russia. He discussed the situation with Admiral Otto Schniewind, who commanded Marinegruppenkommando Nord, which oversaw operations in Norway. They concluded that Konteradmiral Bey needed to attack the next convoy, or they would all risk censure from Hitler. Dönitz hoped that, as the first five convoys had sailed without incident, the Allies might feel complacent, and so reduce the size of the convoy escort. So, on 19 December, when Dönitz met Hitler, he reported that Bey would attack the next outbound convoy, if a suitable opportunity presented itself.

Bey had his misgivings about using *Scharnhorst*. Both he and his predecessor Vizeadmiral Oskar Kummetz had felt it was worth waiting until *Tirpitz* was repaired. In the meantime, the destroyer force should be increased, and they alone should be used to attack the convoys. If *Scharnhorst* were present, destroyers would be needed to screen her, and so reduce the number that could attack independently. Schniewind did not agree, and argued

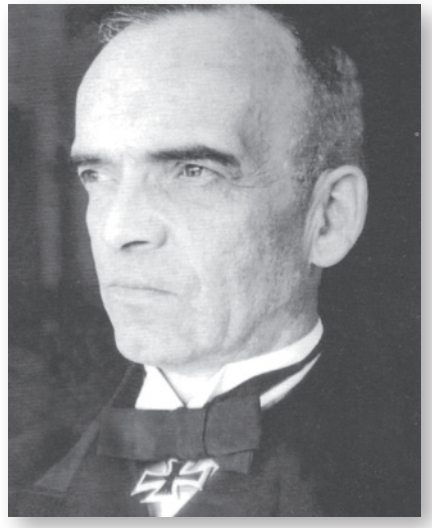
In late 1943, Grossadmiral Dönitz was under considerable pressure to use his Kriegsmarine to influence the course of the war on the Eastern Front. So, when the Arctic convoys resumed that November, he pledged to Hitler that *Scharnhorst* would sortie against them.

Operation *Ostfront*: *Scharnhorst*'s sortie



that it might be necessary to deploy *Scharnhorst* – a move motivated more by the desire to appease Hitler than any operational necessity. Bey realized that as *Scharnhorst* lacked an effective radar, she would have to operate during daylight – something that was in short supply during the Arctic winter. If any sortie was to succeed, Bey needed up-to-date intelligence of the convoy's course and speed, as well as forewarning of the appearance of any British naval forces in the area.

Unfortunately, the poor and overly complex lines of communication between Bey, the U-boat *Gruppe* and the Luftwaffe in Norway meant that he would never receive the intelligence he really needed to carry out his mission. Instead, he would have to do what he could using his destroyers as his 'eyes and ears'. Meanwhile, Gruppe Eisenbart established its patrol line to the south-west of Bear Island, and waited. The Luftwaffe, too, played their limited part, conducting reconnaissance flights over the Arctic Ocean. Then, on 22 December, a German aircraft on a routine meteorological flight spotted an Allied force 340 miles to the west of Narvik. Bey's ships went to three hours' notice for sea, and it was soon confirmed this was an outward-bound convoy. So, Bey had a target, and a mission.



Admiral Schniewind, based in Kiel, was in charge of all Kriegsmarine forces in Norwegian waters. While he shared Bey's concerns that Operation *Ostfront* was a risky venture given the poor weather conditions and lack of time to plan, he still insisted that the sortie should go ahead.

Schniewind in Kiel drafted a set of orders, which were sent to Dönitz for approval. When the plan – codenamed Operation *Ostfront* (*East Front*) – was approved by Dönitz, and then passed on to Bey on board *Tirpitz*, they left the commander on the spot with very little leeway:

> Important enemy convoy carrying supplies and munitions to the Russians further imperils the heroic struggle of our army on the Eastern Front. We must help. Attack the convoy with *Scharnhorst* and destroyers. Exploit the tactical situation with skill and boldness. Do not break off the battle with the task incomplete. Go all out and see the mission through. Your greatest advantage lies in the superior firepower of the *Scharnhorst*. Her contribution is therefore vital. Deploy the destroyers as you see fit. Disengage if you judge that the situation demands it. Break off automatically if heavy forces are met with. Inform the crews accordingly. I have every confidence in you.
>
> *Heil und Sieg*, Dönitz, Grossadmiral.

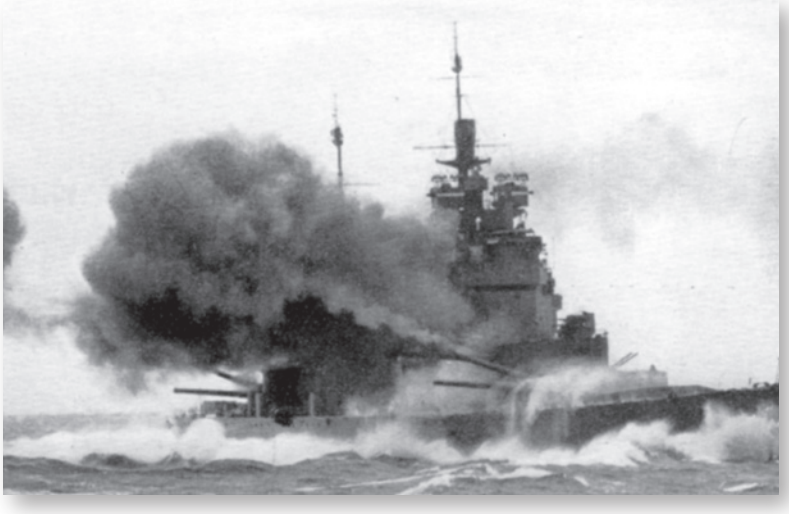
According to this plan, Operation *Ostfront* would commence on Christmas Day, and given the course and speed of the convoy, which was now being intermittently shadowed by German aircraft, Bey's force would intercept it early on 26 December, somewhere to the south of Bear Island. In Narvik, Peters warned his U-boats to be on the lookout for the convoy, while in the Altenfjord, Bey transferred to *Scharnhorst*, which was brought to one hour of readiness. He knew conditions were extremely unfavourable, but his orders left him no real alternative but to sortie northwards, and hope to make contact. In Narvik, Peters, acting as a liaison between Dönitz and Bey, requested that the operation be cancelled, as the conditions were unfavourable for the German U-boats and destroyers. However, Dönitz made it clear that his orders would stand – *Scharnhorst* and her destroyers would put to sea, and their job was to locate and then attack the convoy, regardless of the weather. Despite Bey's misgivings, Operation *Ostfront* would go ahead as planned.

THE ROYAL NAVY

The lack of planning which characterized the German preparations for Operation *Ostfront* was in stark contrast to the situation in the Admiralty, where the Arctic convoy operations that December were planned in considerable detail. The 18 merchant ships of convoy JW 55B would sail from Loch Ewe on 20 December, with their own close escort of five small warships. Their departure, though, had to be coordinated with the departure of the homeward-bound convoy RA 55A, which would leave the Kola Inlet two days later, accompanied by its own close escort. That was the same day that the previous outbound convoy, JW 55A, would reach the Kola Inlet. The basic idea was that many of the same units of the Home Fleet could provide protection for all three of these convoys.

These protective units consisted of an Ocean Destroyer Escort, which sailed from the Faeroes, and then Force 1 and Force 2. The Cruiser Covering Force, made up of Vice Admiral Burnett's three cruisers, had already made the voyage north in support of convoy JW 55A. It was designated as Force 1, and from Murmansk it would provide cover for RA 55A until it passed out of the Barents Sea. Then, Burnett's force would head south and do the same for JW 55B, and protect it as it sailed on to the Kola Inlet. So, this would be a round trip for Burnett and his men. Leaving directly with RA 55A was a force of four destroyers. When the outward- and homeward-bound convoys neared each other, they would also detach themselves, and join JW 55A, to boost the strength of its escort during the convoy's passage of the Barents Sea.

The Distant Cover Force was designated as Force 2. It consisted of Admiral Fraser's flagship the *Duke of York*, accompanied by a cruiser and four destroyers. On 12 December, Fraser's force sailed from Scapa Flow, and headed to the Kola Inlet, covering convoy JW 55A. It would remain at Vænga near Murmansk until 18 December, when it left for Akureyri in the north of Iceland. There, it would refuel, and prepare to steam off to provide distant cover for convoy JW 55B. In addition, long-range air cover would be provided to the east of Iceland by aircraft stationed there. The whole scheme of ship movements was hugely complex, particularly as it involved the coordination of warships with a wide range of capabilities and fuel requirements, the organization of merchant-ship convoys and their escorts and covering forces, all sailing from three widely spaced points. However, by this stage of the war, the Admiralty was used to organizing and running such hugely complicated operations.



The *Duke of York*, firing a full salvo from her 14in. guns, while steaming at full speed in heavy seas. She had the ability to direct these guns using her Type 284 fire control radar, as well as by more conventional means.

Admiral Fraser was keenly aware that the key part of these ship movements would be their passage through the Barents Sea. That was when they were closest to German

The *Onslaught* was one of the eight destroyers that made up Captain McCoy's Fighting Destroyer Escort for Convoy JW 55B. She was an O-class vessel, one of three in the force, and a sister ship of *Opportune*, which took part in the final torpedo attack on *Scharnhorst*.

U-boat bases, airfields and to the *Scharnhorst*. So, the intention was to make sure the homeward-bound convoy RA 55A was well clear of this key area before convoy JW 55B entered it. That would allow Force 1 and Force 2 to concentrate their efforts on protecting the passage of both convoys through these cold and hostile seas. Fraser knew that if *Scharnhorst* put to sea, and Bey managed to push past his two naval groups, then the convoy itself was ill equipped to defend itself. The close escort was only there to protect it from aircraft and U-boats. The Ocean Escort of modern destroyers was more useful, but it would take a very lucky torpedo hit to stop *Scharnhorst*. So, the best Fraser could really hope for was that if the situation arose, the destroyers could deter Bey from pressing home his attack on the convoy.

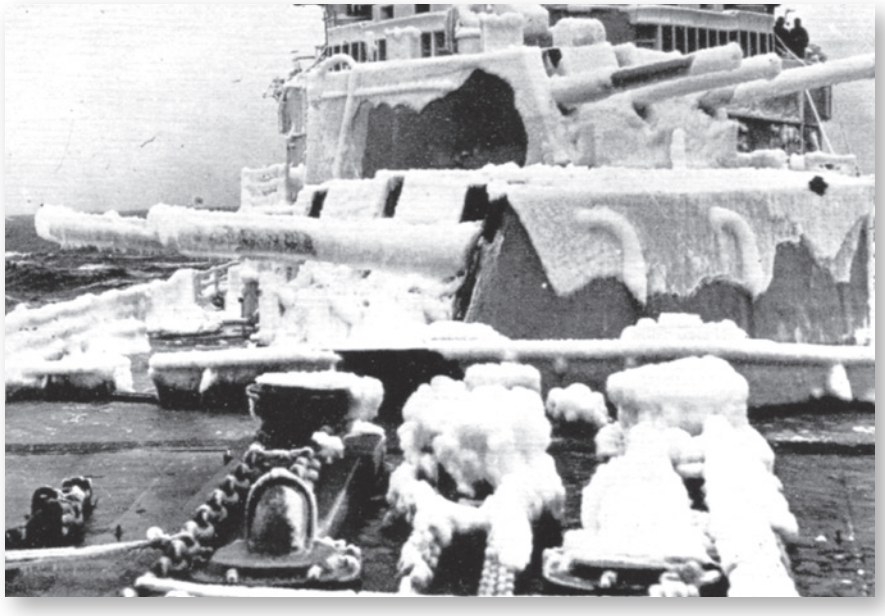
Burnett's cruisers would be a more powerful blocking force, but they lacked enough firepower to seriously threaten *Scharnhorst*. Their big advantage was their radar, which Fraser knew was more effective than the sets carried on *Scharnhorst* or her accompanying destroyers. So, if contact was made during the long hours of Arctic darkness, then Burnett's cruisers had the ability to engage *Scharnhorst* using radar. This might be sufficient to deflect the *Scharnhorst* from his course, and prevent her from locating the convoy. In theory, then, the same radar would allow the British cruisers to shadow the German battleship, and by tracking her, this would allow Fraser to intercept the *Scharnhorst* before she either reached the convoy, or retired back to the Altenfjord. There were many variables in play, but Fraser had the utmost confidence in Burnett, and would let him act as he thought best. Fraser's job, then, was to locate the *Scharnhorst* and bring her to battle.

Here he had four key advantages. The first was intelligence. Having broken the German Ultra signal codes, the British could read a lot of German naval signals. Fraser was privy to this information, and he could expect to know what Bey's intentions were. Secondly, Fraser had a professional staff, which helped him manage such a complex operation. The third was the edge radar gave him, particularly during the long hours of darkness. Once *Scharnhorst* was detected, she could be shadowed, and Fraser's Force 1 could be directed towards the enemy ship. Finally, there was Fraser's flagship herself. The *Duke of York* outgunned the *Scharnhorst*, and so if a naval duel developed, she had more firepower, and the ability to direct these guns using radar fire control. If *Scharnhorst* could be located, and then brought to battle, Fraser was quietly confident in his fleet's ability to damage or sink the German battleship.

THE CAMPAIGN

THE FORCES GATHER

The whole operation was set in motion by the hoisting of a flag. At 1700hrs on Monday 20 December 1943, a flag hoist reading 'Convoy will proceed to sea' was hoisted above the SS *Fort Kullyspell*. This Canadian-built 'Victory ship' of 7,192 tons was the flagship of Rear Admiral Maitland Boucher, who commanded Convoy JW 55B. Although retired, the 55-year-old admiral from South Africa was called back into service as Royal Navy Reserve (RNR) commodore, and given the task of commanding convoys. Slowly, the 19 merchant ships of the convoy pulled up their anchors, and began heading out of Loch Ewe. This remote sea loch on the north-west coast of Scotland served as the assembly point for the Arctic convoys. Once out in the Minches, the convoy turned north, and headed up the Scottish coast, between the mainland and the Isle of Lewis. By midnight, the convoy was passing Cape Wrath, the north-westerly tip of the Scottish mainland, and the ships began rolling in the Atlantic swell. This was a Fast Convoy in name only – its maximum speed was just 9½ knots.



The forward turrets of the light cruiser *Belfast*, blanketed in ice while serving in Arctic waters. These 6in. Mark XXIII guns, housed in triple turrets, had a maximum range of up to 25,480 yards (23,300m). While they lacked the penetration to inflict any serious damage on *Scharnhorst*, these guns, like those of *Sheffield* or *Jamaica*, were still capable of knocking out sensors or fire control equipment.

In most Arctic convoys, the merchant ships were arrayed in several widely spaced columns, and in up to five rows. The whole formation might cover several square miles of sea. The most vulnerable ships, such as tankers, were kept in the centre of the convoy. The local and through escorts were each given a sector to patrol around the convoy's perimeter.

Clustered around the convoy, protecting it from U-boats, was a handful of escort ships – two corvettes and a minesweeper. A second minesweeper had missed the sailing due to engine problems – she would try to catch it up later. These small warships, grandly designated the Local Escort, would stay with the convoy until it reached the latitude of 64° North, when they would return to Loch Ewe. Also grouped around the convoy was the slightly larger Through Escort, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Frank J. Hewitt in the minesweeper *Gleaner*. She was accompanied by two old destroyers and two corvettes. Hewitt took his orders from Rear Admiral Boucher, and his force would stay with the convoy all the way to the Kola Inlet – the seaway leading to Murmansk. These escorts were able to deal with any enemy U-boats they encountered, but they were not powerful enough to take on *Scharnhorst*, or a flotilla of German destroyers. That was the job of three other groups of Allied warships, which were scattered in three locations further to the north.

The first of these was the Ocean Destroyer Escort (or Fighting Destroyer Escort), a force of eight modern British and Canadian destroyers from the Home Fleet's 17th Destroyer Flotilla. When JW 55B put to sea, they were lying off Tórshavn in the Faeroes, taking on fuel and stores. This force, commanded by Captain 'Bes' McCoy, would meet the convoy at the point where the Local Escort turned back. It would then escort it the rest of the way to the Kola Inlet. McCoy's main job was to protect the convoy from attack by German destroyers, but his ships would also help counter any attacks by U-boats and aircraft. These destroyers, though, were not expected to keep the *Scharnhorst* at bay if she tried to attack the convoy. That was the job of two more powerful naval forces. When the convoy put to sea, the first of these was in the Kola Inlet. This was Vice Admiral 'Bob' Burnett's Force 1 – one heavy and two light cruisers. Burnett's job was to screen the convoy from any German surface ships, and to fight to protect it if he had to.

First, though, Burnett had another important job to do. As JW 55B left Loch Ewe, Burnett was holding a conference for all the captains and mates of Convoy RA 55A. This homeward-bound convoy of 23 merchant ships

was scheduled to sail from the Kola Inlet on the morning of 22 December, accompanied by its own Through Escort of four small warships, and a seven-strong Fighting Destroyer Escort. Burnett's Force 1 would accompany it as it passed through the dangerous waters of the Barents Sea. Once it had passed into less dangerous waters, Force 1 would detach itself from the convoy, somewhere near Bear Island, and head south to locate Convoy JW 55B. It would then head back to the Kola Inlet, covering the convoy as it went. That same afternoon, Force 1 was at sea, to the east of Jan Mayen Island, bound for Iceland. This small force was made up of Admiral Bruce Fraser's flagship, the battleship *Duke of York*, a light cruiser and four destroyers. After refuelling in Iceland, Fraser would return to sea, and provide additional cover for both convoys.

As the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, Fraser was responsible for masterminding the whole operation – the safe passage of the two convoys, and the orchestrating of the naval forces deployed for their protection. So, the *Duke of York* served as his floating headquarters, where he and his staff gathered intelligence reports passed on to them from the Admiralty in London, and reacted accordingly. He enjoyed access to Ultra intelligence reports, which often included crucial intercepts from German naval signals. So, while the arrangement of convoy sailings and their protection was well orchestrated, Fraser's main task was to be ready to deal with any unexpected threat. He fully expected that the *Scharnhorst* would try to attack JW 55B, and so he was planning to use the convoy as bait, to draw her out, and then to intercept and destroy her.

By dawn on Tuesday 21 December, Convoy JW 55B was off the west coast of Orkney. It was there, while protected by air cover flying from airfields in Orkney, that Boucher arranged his convoy into its proper formation. This was a frustrating and time-consuming job, but eventually the merchant ships were lined up in six columns, each of two to four ships, with the *Fort Kullyspell* in its centre, ahead of the convoy's most vulnerable ship, the Panamanian-registered tanker *Norlys* of 9,900 tons. The convoy covered almost 5 miles of ocean.

Convoy JW 55B formation

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6
Fort Nakasley (UK)	*Bernard N. Baker* (US)	*Fort Kullyspell* (UK) Flag	*Thomas U. Walter* (US)	*Harold L. Winslow* (US)	*Ocean Viceroy* (UK)
Ocean Valour (UK)	*Fort Vercheres* (UK)	*Norlys* (Panama)	*British Statesman* (UK)	*Ocean Pride* (UK)	*Will Rogers* (US)
John J. Abel (US)	*Cardinal Gibbons* (US)	*Brockholst Livingston* (US)	*Ocean Messenger* (UK)	*Ocean Gypsy* (UK)	–
–	*John Wanamaker* (US)	*John Vining* (US)	–	–	–

Note: The designation (UK) also includes Commonwealth-registered ships.

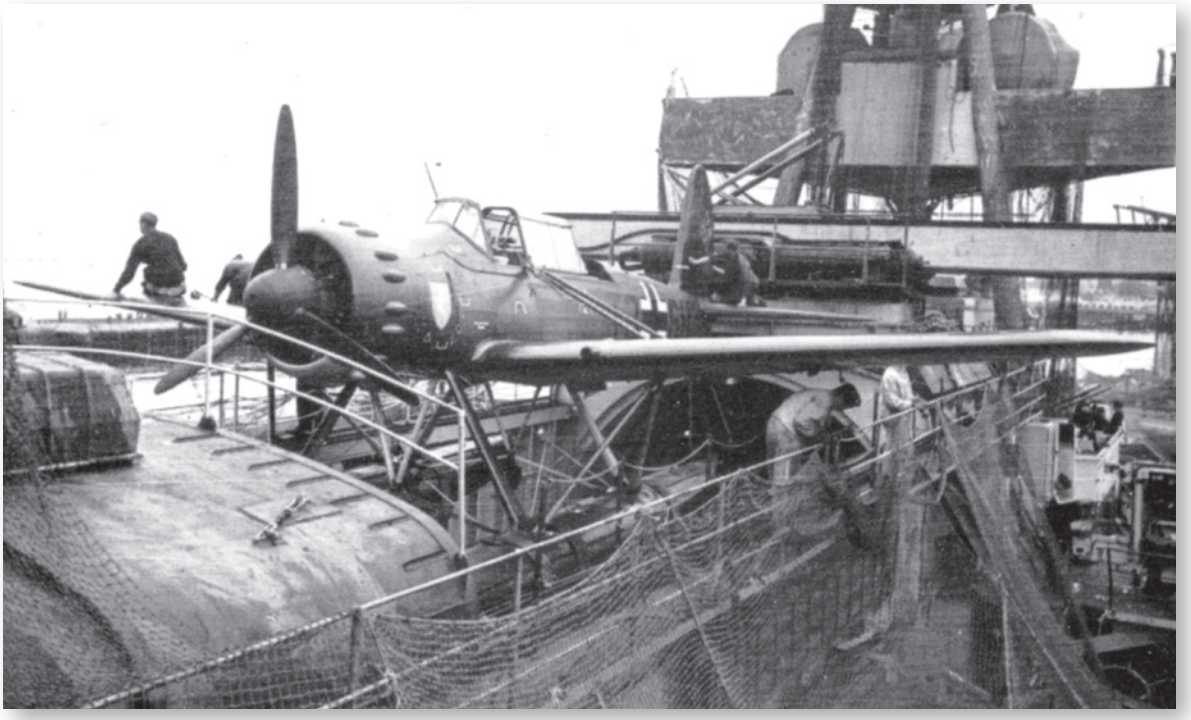
By noon, Force 1 had reached Akureyri in the north of Iceland, at the end of the long Eyjafjördur. Fraser had just learned that Convoy JW 55A had reached the Kola Inlet safely the previous evening. That evening, he wrote in his diary: 'With the safe arrival of JW 55A, I felt strongly that the *Scharnhorst*

would come out, and endeavour to attack JW 55B.' If he had been able to look into the Altenfjord, his suspicions would have been confirmed. At 1600hrs that afternoon, Konteradmiral Erich Bey ordered *Scharnhorst* and the five destroyers of his battlegroup to go to six hours' notice for sea. That meant firing up the boilers, and stopping all lengthy shore leave. Strangely, some 80 of *Scharnhorst*'s crew had just been sent off home for Christmas, even though Bey was well aware that Grossadmiral Dönitz had just pledged to Hitler that *Scharnhorst* would attack the next outward-bound convoy. For the moment, though, all he could do was request that Luftwaffe reconnaissance flights be stepped up, and order Kapitän zur See Peters' U-boat crews out on patrol to remain vigilant.

During 1942 and 1943, German U-boats deployed in Norwegian waters had proven highly effective in harrying the Arctic convoys, despite the growing strength of convoy escorts, and the arrival of escort carriers.

At 2345hrs, Captain McCoy's Fighting Destroyer Escort put to sea, and headed towards the north-east, and its rendezvous with Convoy JW 55B. The rendezvous was expected late the following afternoon. By 0800hrs the following morning, Wednesday 22 December, JW 55B was 60 miles to the north of the Faeroes, and 400 miles from German-occupied Norway. The night had been an eventful one, as two of the merchant ships had failed to keep in formation when the convoy changed course. So, he reduced speed to 8 knots while the destroyer *Whitehall* was dispatched to round up the stragglers. At 0920hrs, the last of the Local Escort force, the minesweeper *Hydra*, had caught up with them, having repaired her engines. Sunderland flying boats of Coastal Command had been searching ahead of the convoy, and so when an aircraft was heard astern of the convoy, most expected it to be a friendly one. Instead, it turned out to be a German Ju-88 twin-engined bomber, on a routine meteorological flight. Boucher had to presume the convoy had been spotted. He was right.

At 1045hrs, the Ju-88's crew radioed their airfield near Trondheim, reporting a force of 40 troopships and escorts, possibly accompanied by an aircraft carrier, heading north-east at 10 knots. This singularly inaccurate report caused some consternation in Kiel when it was passed on to Admiral Schniewind, but he had a poor opinion of Luftwaffe reports, and remained sceptical. The fear, though, was that this was an amphibious force, heading to Narvik. He contacted *Tirpitz*, and passed the report on to Bey. Peters' U-boats were ordered south to look for the Allied force, and more Luftwaffe flights were sent up. As a precaution, Bey ordered *Scharnhorst* and the destroyers to go to three hours' notice. However, that afternoon, when the Ju-88 crew were debriefed, it became apparent that the sighting report was



Scharnhorst carried two Arado Ar-196 float planes, which were housed in a hanger aft of the funnel. Originally, she carried an extra plane and catapult, housed on top of Caesar turret. This had been removed by 1943. The aircraft were embarked to carry out reconnaissance flights.

unreliable 'owing to poor visibility'. So, Peters ordered his U-boats back to their patrol line. Tensions remained high: something was out there, and the bad weather over the Norwegian Sea was hampering the launch of German reconnaissance flights.

At 1400hrs, McCoy's destroyers made contact with the convoy, and an hour later, they were in place around it. The Local Escort was detached, and began heading back to the Faeroes to refuel, before their trip back to Loch Ewe. This news was passed on to Admiral Fraser, moored off Akureyri, whose ships were busy taking on stores. He also learned of the German bomber, and the likelihood that the convoy had been spotted. That did not change anything, though. After all, he was using JW 55B to lure *Scharnhorst* out from her Norwegian lair. Over in the Kola Inlet, another convoy, RA 55A, was getting under way. That afternoon, its 23 merchant ships struggled into formation, and the five small ships of the Through Escort formed up around them. So did the eight warships of the Fighting Destroyer Escort, and as darkness fell, this sizeable convoy got under way, and headed out into the Barents Sea. For the moment, Force 1 remained in Vænga, while Burnett and his officers attended a farewell dinner hosted by the Soviet port commander, Admiral Arseniy Golovko.

That night, the two convoys were at sea – JW 55A heading northwards towards the Barents Sea, and RA 55A steaming towards the north-west, trying to skirt the fringe of the pack ice to keep as far away as it could from the hostile Norwegian coast. In between the two convoys, to the south of Bear Island, a line of surfaced German U-boats rolled around in the rough seas, their lookouts chilled to the bone as they peered through the dark, trying to be the first to spot a convoy. By now, they knew one was heading towards them from the south-west, but so far, they had no inkling another convoy was approaching from the east. In Vænga and Akureyri, Force 1

and Force 2 rode at anchor, as their commanders prepared to play their part in this great naval chess game. Meanwhile, in the Langfjord, a tributary of the Altenfjord, the *Scharnhorst* and her crew tried to gather up some festive cheer, despite the knowledge that they might soon be steaming off to do battle. On board *Tirpitz*, further down the Altenfjord, Konteradmiral Bey began planning his attack on the approaching convoy.

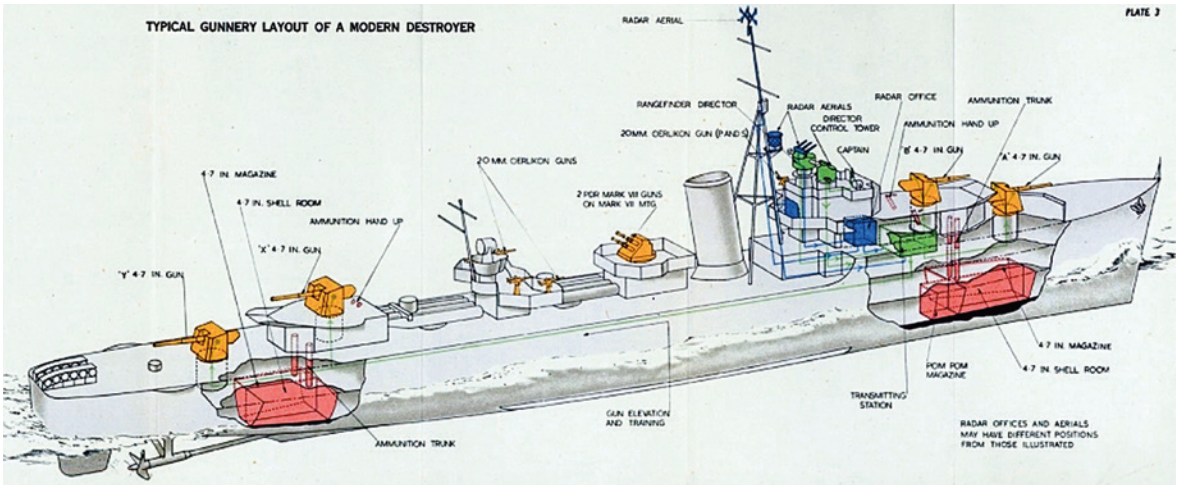
INTO THE BARENTS SEA

Throughout the night, both convoys continued on their journey, although the sea was extremely rough, and the ice was forming on the ships' decks. In Akureyri, as ice lined the fjord, Admiral Fraser spent the morning of Thursday 23 December going over his plans. He would sail that evening, and would arrive in the Barents Sea by the afternoon of Boxing Day – 26 December. His plan to ambush the *Scharnhorst* depended on Force 2 remaining undetected. So, he intended to delay sailing until that evening, to avoid loitering in seas where the enemy might have a U-boat screen, or where he could be spotted by Luftwaffe reconnaissance planes. That afternoon, though, he had some good news. A Soviet reconnaissance flight over the Altenfjord revealed the damaged *Tirpitz* was still at her mooring in the Kåfjord, while the *Scharnhorst* was in the nearby Langfjord, with three destroyers lying between her and its mouth, where it opened into the Altenfjord. Given *Scharnhorst* still had not put to sea, for the moment both convoys were safe from surface attack. Another report confirmed that the German plane had indeed spotted Convoy JW 55B.

Fraser knew that Bey would have to make his move soon, or risk letting the convoy pass him by. As the day wore on, more news arrived on board the British flagship. Boucher in JW 55A was now convinced he had been sighted again that morning. Shortly before 1100hrs, two Dornier Do 217 bombers took station astern of the convoy, and continued to shadow it until darkness fell. The convoy was now 400 miles west of Narvik, and so within range of German air bases. What Boucher did not know was that the spotting planes that morning had identified the convoy's size, course and speed. This, of course, was exactly what Fraser wanted. All he needed now was for Bey to take the bait. While Force 2 prepared to set sail, he let his men enjoy their last hours ashore, and even ordered the Royal Marine band to play Christmas carols from the battleship's quarterdeck. Then, at 1700hrs, he ordered his captains to join him for drinks, as he laid out his plans to them. Now everyone had their orders, and knew exactly what was expected of them.

That done, Fraser announced his intention to set sail from Akureyri at 2200hrs that evening. When the time came, and watched by Icelanders on the shore, the *Duke of York*, *Jamaica* and the four destroyers recovered their anchors, and headed north up the long fjord, towards the open sea. It was so dark they could not see the mountains lining the fjord, but the ships were equipped with surface search radar, and this helped them navigate their way up the 120-mile-long waterway. By then,

Like every other warship taking part in the battle, the crew of the light cruiser *Sheffield* remained at action stations for much of the engagement, and so were forced to catch whatever rest they could at their posts. These men are Royal Marines, manning X turret.



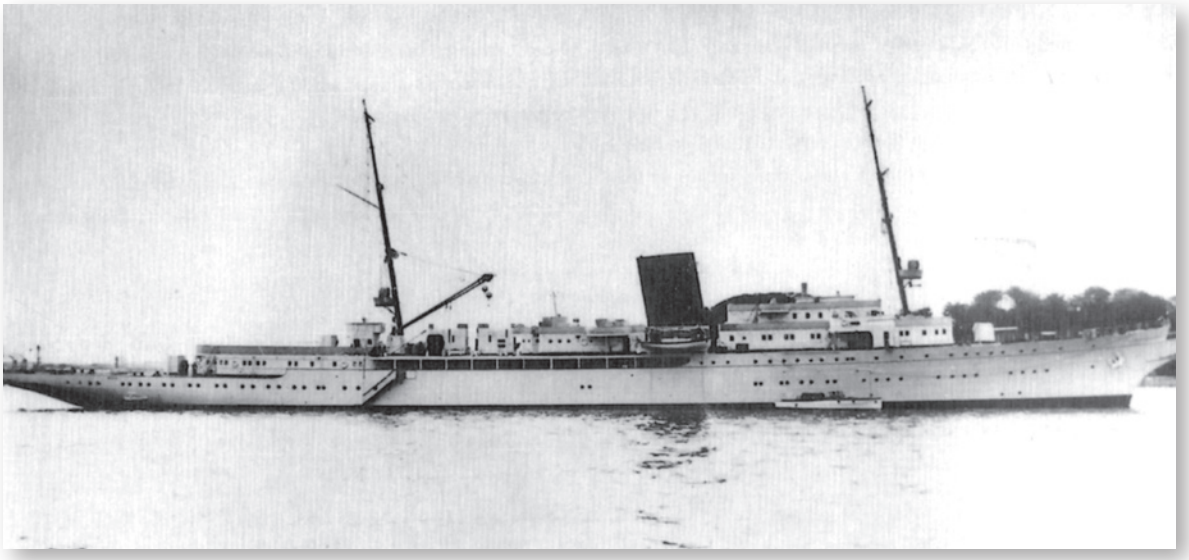
This period diagram shows the weaponry layout of a British wartime-built destroyer of the S, T, U, V and W classes. They carried four 4.7in. guns in single mounts, and eight 21in. torpedoes, mounted amidships in two quadruple launchers.

Burnett's Force 1 had already been at sea for more than 12 hours. It had slipped out of the Kola Inlet that morning, following northwards in the wake of the recently departed convoy. The weather was bad, with rough seas and snow showers, and the visibility was extremely poor. Weather reports claimed that conditions would deteriorate even more over the next two days. Still, darkness and poor visibility were not a major problem. Like Fraser's, Burnett's ships were equipped with search radar, and so the vice admiral was sure his ships would be able to handle themselves in the Arctic darkness.

During the night, the weather conditions in the Barents Sea deteriorated further. The south-westerly gale was building in intensity, while now, three days before the shortest day, daylight was more like twilight, and only lasted for a few brief hours. Still, in JW 55B, Boucher hoped the bad weather would help cloak his convoy as it headed north-eastwards towards Bear Island. At dawn on Christmas Eve, Friday 24 December, as Force 1 and Force 2 also headed in the general direction of Bear Island, the convoy was making heavy weather of it, her ships slowed by the following gale. Then, at 1220hrs, despite the terrible flying conditions, the German shadowers returned. While this is what Fraser wanted, the danger to JW 55B was all too real. In fact, that morning, Fraser's whole plan came within an ace of unravelling. German listening posts had detected radio traffic coming from the Arctic Ocean, and by plotting its bearing, they showed it had come from somewhere astern of the convoy. Schniewind dismissed this as unimportant, thinking it probably came from a straggler, or was a plotting error. The signal had in fact come from the *Duke of York*.

There were other sources of intelligence gathering, though. The Luftwaffe had done well to locate the convoy, but technical problems kept its best radar-equipped planes on the ground. So, the suggestion to check out the radio intercept using a search plane came to nothing. If it had been done, then Force 2 might have been detected, and the *Scharnhorst* recalled to the Altenfjord. Ahead of the convoy, though, lay the U-boat screen, which currently consisted of seven boats. If the convoy came their way, then it might well be spotted – and even attacked. In any case, if the battleship sailed, these U-boats would be able to guide *Scharnhorst* towards the convoy.

Meanwhile, the patrolling boats and their crews tried to celebrate Christmas Eve with a decent meal. They would also have to endure another



The *Grille* (*Cricket*) had once been Hitler's official yacht. During the war, though, she was used as a minelayer, before being decommissioned, and converted into a floating headquarters. In December 1943, she was moored in Narvik, where she was used by Kapitän zur See Peters, who commanded the Kriegsmarine's U-boats in Arctic waters. She also served as a useful conduit for signals between Bey and his superiors.

night of howling gales, bitter cold, inky darkness, pitching seas and driving sleet and snow. Moreover, it was already a Force 8 out there in the Barents Sea, and according to Luftwaffe meterological reports the weather seemed to be getting worse.

The forecast was right. During the early hours of Christmas Day – Saturday 25 December – the crew of the U-boats were bearing the full brunt of the south-westerly gale. On *U-601*, acting Kapitänleutnant Otto Hansen recalled his boat pitching violently in the sea, and huge waves towering 8–10m above the boat's conning tower, before crashing down on top of them. It was only when they crested one of these huge waves that they had a few seconds to look around, and try to spot any ships out there in the darkness. Then they were cast down into the trough again, and the gruelling process repeated itself. By 0900hrs, he had had enough of this, and dived his boat to 60m. There, in the relative calm, his hydrophone operator could still listen out for passing ships, but at least his men would not feel the full force of the sea. Just a few minutes after diving, the hydrophone operator heard the sound of a ship's propellor, approaching from the south-west. Soon more appeared – all of them heading directly towards them. It was the convoy.

Hansen brought his boat up to 40m, and listened as the convoy passed directly overhead. The sound was almost deafening, and it took 20 minutes for all the ships to pass. He waited a little before surfacing, in case an escort ship was following at the back of the convoy, and then he turned his boat around and brought *U-601* to the surface. He could not see anything, but gave chase anyway. At 0952hrs, Hansen signalled the U-boat base in Narvik, reporting: 'Run over by convoy in square AB6720. Enemy steering 60°.' Once deciphered, the signal was shown to Kapitän zur See Peters, who forwarded it to Admiral Schniewind in Kiel. He was convinced this was the outward-bound Arctic convoy they had been waiting for: 'Course, speed and composition make it possible to say with certainty that this is a PQ Convoy, bound for Murmansk or the White Sea.' He duly passed the sighting report on to Konteradmiral Bey on board the *Tirpitz*. By then, though, Schniewind had already made up his mind that *Scharnhorst* must attack the convoy. He had even drafted the attack orders.

Given the south-easterly gale sweeping over the Barents Sea during the battle, it was unlikely that any of the U-boats of Gruppe Eisenbart would be able to carry out a successful torpedo attack on Convoy JW 55B. However, they were able to act as scouting vessels, locating the convoy, and then shadowing it, radioing sighting reports to Narvik which would then be passed on to Konteradmiral Bey in the *Scharnhorst*.

The draft plan of what Schniewind had dubbed Operation *Ostfront* had already been passed on to Grossadmiral Dönitz for his approval. Dönitz was in Paris, having enjoyed a Christmas Eve dinner with his leading U-boat aces. He was handed a copy of Schniewind's draft order, which he read on the plane home. At 1412hrs, he ordered his headquarters staff to call Schniewind, to approve the plan, and confirmed his decision in a teleprinter message. By 1430hrs, the orders were being passed on to Peters in Narvik, who in turn passed it on to Bey in *Tirpitz*. Operation *Ostfront* was scheduled to begin later that day. Bey set the time for its commencement at 1700hrs. He also arranged for a destroyer to transfer him and his staff to *Scharnhorst*, in time for the scheduled departure. Bey then made his last-minute preparations, including the ordering of two small R-boats to serve as minesweepers, for their passage through the minefield guarding the approaches to the Altenfjord. Despite his own reservations, Operation *Ostfront* would go ahead.

Back in the Barents Sea, other U-boats of Gruppe Eisenbart had now detected the convoy. The neighbouring boats had heard his signal, and so turned to intercept the passing convoy. To the south of Hansen was *U-716*, commanded by Oberleutnant-zur-See Hans Dunkelberg. He headed towards the north-east, running with the gale behind him, and shortly before 1300hrs, he was rewarded by a glimpse of the convoy – or rather one of its escorting destroyers. He shadowed the convoy – a dangerous thing to do as he could be detected by radar. Once he had a steady bearing, he launched an acoustic torpedo at the destroyer, at a range of 3,000m. It missed, and soon the contact disappeared towards the north-east. A mile to port, Hansen had also spotted the convoy, and sent in two more sighting reports, at 1102hrs and 1204hrs. When he suddenly spotted a destroyer ahead of him, he dived, and waited. By the time he surfaced again, the destroyer had gone, but so had the convoy.

Further north-west, Kapitänleutnant Hans Hildebrandt in *U-636* was not part of the wolfpack, but was hunting independently, and was returning to Hammerfest after a long and uneventful patrol. He set a course to intercept

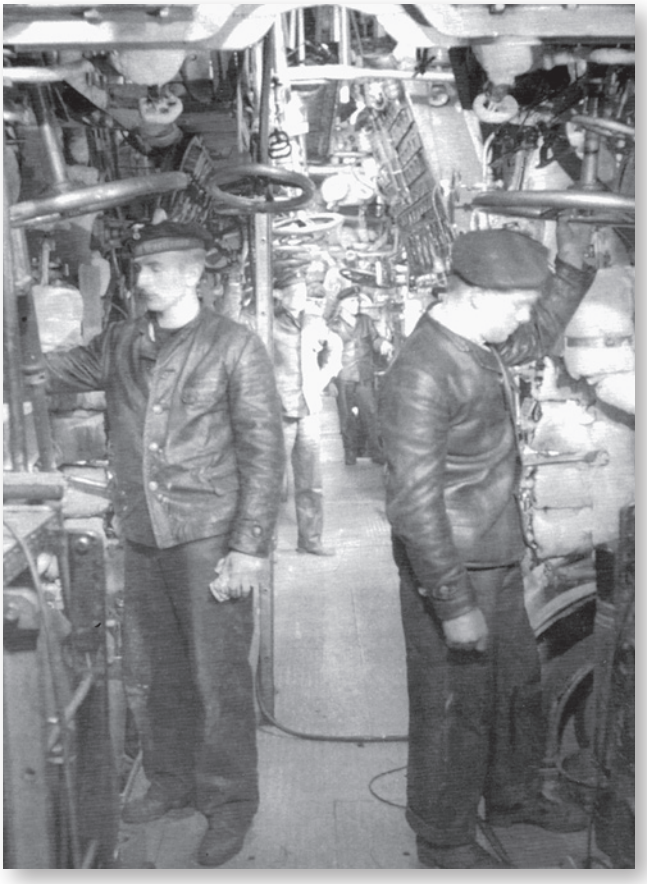
the convoy. This, though, meant turning beam-on to the gale, and within minutes, a huge wave crashed over the conning tower and sent a flood of water pouring through the open hatch, which a relief lookout had just clambered through. The icy water surged through the boat, knocking out one of the engines, and then the batteries, which began emitting clouds of poisonous chlorine gas. The engine was restarted, and Hildebrandt turned end-on to the gale, staying on the surface to air the boat. Finally, at 1800hrs, Hildebrandt dived his boat again. Shortly afterwards, he heard the sound of ships approaching. It was the convoy. He stayed submerged, though, as it passed overhead. All he could do was to radio Narvik with the news.

So, despite passing through the waiting line of U-boats, Convoy JW 55B had emerged unscathed. Only one torpedo had been fired, and it had missed its target. What the wolfpack had achieved, though, was that it had given Kapitän zur See Peters in Narvik a better understanding of the convoy's course and speed. Hildebrandt's last report merely confirmed this. The information was not only passed to Bey, but the Luftwaffe were also given the reports. Despite the terrible flying conditions, a few search aircraft were sent up. At 1115hrs, a Dornier Do 217 sighted the convoy, and shadowed it briefly, until it was obscured by snow squalls. Meanwhile, the U-boats had not given up. While Hildebrandt continued on to Hammerfest, the wolfpack pursued the convoy, with both the U-boats and their quarry running with the gale, heading north-east – towards Bear Island and the line of the winter pack ice. At 1636hrs, *U-601* was almost run over by a corvette, which suddenly appeared out of the darkness. The U-boat was not spotted, though, and both it and the convoy continued on their way.

Kapitän zur See Fritz Hintze (1901–43) was the *Scharnhorst*'s fourth commanding officer, taking command of the battleship on 14 October 1943. Just after giving the order to abandon ship, Hintze told his men that they had done their duty to the last. He gave his lifejacket to a sailor, and went down with his ship.

Meanwhile, in the Altenfjord, the battlegroup was preparing for sea. At 1100hrs, *Scharnhorst* and the destroyers were ordered to go to one hour's readiness. While Christmas lunch still went ahead, other celebrations were cancelled, and decorations were torn down. Afterwards, Norwegians living on the Langfjord found Christmas trees washed up on the shore, having been thrown overboard as the battleship prepared to sail. Three local pilots had been brought on board – one for the battleship and two for the destroyers. The commanders of the minesweepers *R-56* and *R-58* were briefed by Kapitän zur See Fritz Hintze about the passage through the minefield. Two tugs appeared to shepherd the battleships down the Langfjord; and on the *Tirpitz* in the nearby Kåfjord, Bey and his 36-man staff had transferred onto the destroyer *Z-30*. However, due to a power problem on board the supply ship *Nordmark*, the destroyer had to endure a delay taking on the ammunition and stores she needed. This meant the planned departure of the battlegroup at 1700hrs was now looking unlikely.

In fact, it was 1830hrs before Bey and his men boarded the *Scharnhorst*. He ordered Hintze to weigh anchor at 1900hrs. This meant that their departure was now two hours behind schedule. Out in the Barents Sea, that might make all the difference between intercepting the convoy or not. So, Bey was keen



Part of the engine room of a Scharnhorst-class battleship. The German battleship was powered by three Brown, Bovery & Co. turbines, using steam generated by 12 Wagner high-pressure boilers. These generated 165,000shp, and gave *Scharnhorst* a top speed of 32 knots.

to make up time. Eventually, *Scharnhorst* edged down the fjord, preceded by the two R-boats and a destroyer, and accompanied by the pair of tugs. Once in the wider Altenfjord, the remaining destroyers fell in astern, and the battlegroup headed towards the open sea. Having passed through the narrow Stjernsund, Bey ordered the *Scharnhorst* to increase speed to 17 knots. This was a knot more than the R-boats could manage, and so they gradually fell astern, until Bey dismissed them. This made the passage through the German minefield ahead a little trickier, as it called for very precise navigation, to avoid straying from the cleared channel. Still, by 2110hrs, they cleared the minefield, and Bey ordered the destroyers to move up and form a screen ahead and astern of the battleship.

The *Scharnhorst* increased her speed to 25 knots, and at 2300hrs, they reached Point Lucie – a navigational beacon that marked the approaches to the Altenfjord. They were now in the Barents Sea, where they felt the full blast of the gale for the first time, now blowing hard from the south-south-west. Bey ordered the battlegroup to turn to starboard, and steer a course of 010°. That meant they were running with the gale behind them, but still it was tough for the destroyers, which began pitching and rolling uncomfortably. The German destroyers were sleek fighting machines, and in theory their high forecastles and clipper bows would have made them perform well in a heavy sea. However, they were armed with 15cm (5.9in.) guns, which made them top-heavy, and pressed down on their forecastles. As a result, they shipped a lot of water over their bows, and rolled heavily. All in all, it made for an uncomfortable night for the destroyer crews.

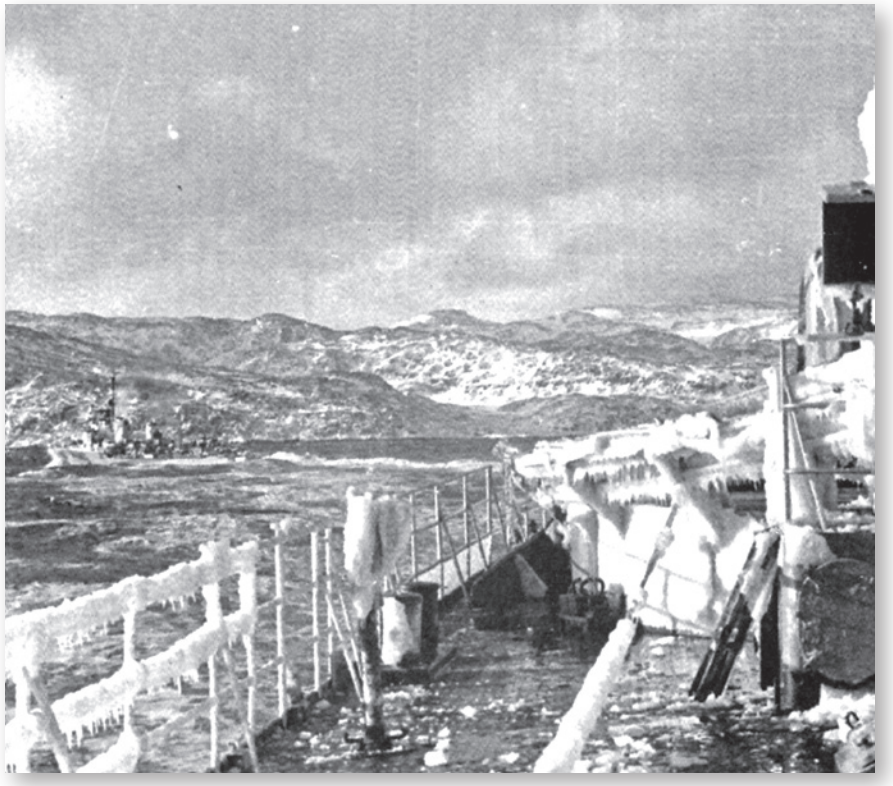
Still, Bey's battlegroup was now at sea. The last of the pieces were now in play on this vast maritime chessboard. The German force was heading northwards towards Bear Island. They were also about to pass through the epicentre of the gale, which lay a little beyond North Cape that evening. About 240 miles ahead of them lay Convoy JW 55B. If the U-boat sighting reports were correct, Bey could expect to intercept it the following morning, at around 0930hrs. This, though, depended on visibility, which was already extremely poor, and on the meteorologists being correct in their assumption that the gale would continue the following day. Bey was also counting on his destroyers being able to keep up with *Scharnhorst* as she ploughed on through the heavy seas. Unknown to Bey, though, there were three other groups at sea that night. Far to the north, Convoy RA 55A had now passed through the danger area of the Barents Sea without being detected. However, that Christmas evening, Burnett's Force 1 and Fraser's Force 2 were also in the Barents Sea, and heading towards the same point.

THE FORCES CONVERGE

While Bey was heading north, others were deciding his fate. At 2000hrs on Christmas evening, Kapitän zur See Peters in Narvik called Admiral Schniewind in Kiel. He expressed his concern about the weather, and thought the destroyers would be hard-pushed to find the convoy in those conditions. He even suggested the operation should be cancelled. Some 40 minutes later, Schniewind sent a message to Dönitz in Berlin, proposing exactly the same thing. Earlier that evening, Bey had sent a radio report to Kiel, saying that he had to reduce speed due to the weather, and that his destroyers would find it hard to use their guns effectively. In other words, he sounded reluctant to press on with his mission. So, it was now up to Grossadmiral Dönitz. His reply, though, was unequivocal. Shortly after midnight, Bey was handed a signal from Dönitz, which stressed the importance of the operation, and insisted that Bey carry on as planned. Bey had no choice but to press home the attack.

At the same time, Bey received the latest sighting reports, which showed he was on course to intercept it the following morning. He was also told that Gruppe Eisenbart would pursue the convoy, and attempt to regain contact. Even the Luftwaffe sounded optimistic, as they reported there was no sign of any British covering force within 50 miles of the convoy. With the decision to abandon the mission taken from him, Bey had to figure out what he intended to do when contact was made. His first question was whether he could count on his destroyers. At 0300hrs, a signal from Kiel gave him permission to send his destroyers back to the Altenfjord if they could not cope with the weather. He signalled Kapitän zur See Rolf Johannesson in *Z-29*, who commanded the five destroyers. He wanted to know if the destroyers could cope with the weather, and carry out an attack in the teeth of a gale.

British destroyers operating in gale-force conditions in Arctic waters, while escorting an Arctic convoy. These British destroyers were smaller than their German counterparts, but were much more weatherly, even in these challenging conditions. The two destroyers on the left are *Matchless* and *Musketeer*, part of Commander Fisher's 36th Destroyer Division.



German Type 36A Narvik-class destroyers, operating in the Altenfjord. Although well armed, with 15cm (5.9in.) guns, they rarely ventured out into the Barents Sea in winter, due to their poor seakeeping qualities. This in turn was a result of their heavy forward turret, which pressed the destroyer's bows down.

Johannesson replied: 'With sea and wind from astern we have had no difficulties so far. I expect the weather to improve.' Many of his young destroyer crews might have disagreed, but it showed Johannesson was keen to press on, regardless of the conditions. Half an hour later, *Z-29* intercepted a radio message from *U-716*, which reported that the convoy was still holding to its previous course, but was 30 miles further to the west than Bey had expected. This was good news. It meant that the delay in leaving the Altenfjord had not placed the mission in jeopardy. If he could find the convoy in the darkness, he had a good chance of tearing it apart. To help make this happen, Bey planned to detach his destroyers when he reached the vicinity of the convoy, and then use them to search the area until contact was made. Then, Johannesson's destroyers would engage the convoy's escorts, while guiding the *Scharnhorst* towards the convoy, where the battleship would wreak havoc among the small warships and unarmed merchant ships.

It was not just Bey who was awake that night. At 0216hrs on Boxing Day – Sunday 26 December – Admiral Fraser on board the *Duke of York* was woken up, and handed a top-secret signal from the Admiralty. Thanks to Ultra, a German naval signal had been intercepted and decoded. The Admiralty's message read: 'Emergency. *Scharnhorst* probably sailed 6pm, 25 December.' So, the Germans had taken the bait. Just over an hour later, at 0319hrs, another Admiralty signal, sent to all Allied warships in the region, declared: 'Admiralty appreciated that *Scharnhorst* at sea.' Fraser and his staff navigator calculated that the *Scharnhorst* would have reached Point Lucie at around 2300hrs. He realized that *Scharnhorst*'s big 28cm (11in.) guns were only effective if her gunnery direction teams could see their target. This meant that Bey needed to make the most of the few short hours of semi-light

around noon. Working on the assumption that the Germans knew roughly where the convoy was, Fraser could work out the course and speed she would need to hold, to make sure she intercepted the convoy when her guns would be most effective.

That meant that Fraser could predict his German counterpart's next move. What he needed to do now was to look at the maritime chessboard, and make sure all the pieces were in the right place. At 0400hrs, Convoy JW 55B was some 50 miles south of Bear Island, heading east-north-east on a course of 60°. The convoy was making just 6–8 knots in the heavy seas. Convoy RA 55A was now out of danger, having passed Bear Island during the previous morning, and was now 220 miles further to the west. At 0200hrs on Christmas morning, part of the 36th Destroyer Division had been detached from the homeward-bound convoy, as it was no longer in any serious danger from German surface warships. Instead, the destroyers *Matchless*, *Musketeer*, *Opportune* and *Virago* were directed south, to rendezvous with JW 55B, which was entering more dangerous waters. They reached the convoy at 1250hrs that afternoon, and were ordered to take up position on its starboard or south-eastern side. The escort of Convoy JW 55B had now received some very timely reinforcements.

This, in turn, meant that if Bey was accompanied by German destroyers, and these made their own attack on the convoy, then Captain 'Bes' McCoy at least had a flotilla of a dozen destroyers at his disposal – more than enough to protect the convoy, and to drive off his German opponents. Beyond the latitude of Bear Island the convoy would find its way blocked by the line of pack ice. So, there was not enough sea room to divert it completely out of harm's way. Besides, it was the lure that was attracting the big fish. At that moment, Vice Admiral Burnett's Force 1 was 150 miles east of the convoy, and a similar distance from Bear Island. It was heading west-south-west on a course of 235°, and making 18 knots, even while heading into the gale. In effect, the convoy and Burnett were on reciprocal courses, and were closing at a combined speed of 25 knots. As Force 2 was 220 miles astern of the convoy, and making 24 knots, it was clear that Burnett would reach the convoy first, and be in position to intercept the *Scharnhorst*.

Fraser calculated that Burnett should be in position to intercept the *Scharnhorst* before it reached the convoy. Contact would be made, weather permitting, at around 0900hrs. Fraser warned Boucher that he planned to move the convoy onto a more northerly course, but the rear admiral counselled waiting until there was enough light for his merchant ships to see each other. That way, there was less chance of any collisions. Fraser and Burnett also exchanged updates on each other's position, course and speed. So, armed with a clear understanding of where everyone was, and when the *Scharnhorst* could be expected, Fraser began moving his chess pieces around. At 0630hrs, he ordered Boucher to alter the convoy's course onto a new heading of 045° – a modest 15° change to port, onto a north-easterly heading. That meant the convoy would start edging away from the *Scharnhorst*. Also, Burnett was ordered to increase speed to 25 knots – a tough proposition, as his cruisers were heading into the gale – and to alter course towards the west.

That way, Force 1 would be placed firmly between the Germans and the convoy. For Fraser, far to the south-west of the scene of the impending clash, the only remaining variable was Bey. Would he stay on the direct course

The 28cm (11in.) guns of the *Scharnhorst* were mounted in three triple turrets, 'Anton' forward and 'Bruno' superimposed behind her were mounted forward of the bridge, while 'Caesar' turret was emplaced aft. They were served by a highly effective suite of optical rangefinders and a computerised fire control system.

towards the spot where he expected the convoy to be later that morning, or would he approach it from a different direction? In fact, at 0423hrs, he ordered his force to turn onto a new heading of 030° – a little further to the east of his original course. His fear was that the convoy would be able to slip past him in the darkness. That way, he reduced the chances of that happening. At 0500hrs, he turned again, this time steering 003°, or almost due north. By his calculations, he would make contact with the convoy within the next few hours. Just to play safe, though, at 0700hrs, Kapitän zur See Hitze sent the battleship's crew to action stations. Now, *Scharnhorst* was ready for anything. Bey also ordered his destroyers to deploy in scouting formation, forming up in a line deployed 10 miles ahead of the battleship. They would be his 'eyes and ears' in the clash that lay ahead.

This done, Bey reduced the speed of his force to a more manageable 12 knots. That made life easier for the destroyer crews, but it also reduced the chances of stumbling into the convoy before *Scharnhorst*'s gunners had sufficient light to see their targets. Then, a few minutes later, Bey gave a seemingly inexplicable order. It was for his whole battlegroup to alter course to port, onto a new heading of 230°. That meant that instead of heading north, they were steaming towards the south-west. There was no clear reason for this: if he had stayed on his present course, his destroyers would almost certainly have spotted the convoy some time over the next two hours, regardless of Boucher's change of course. Instead, the convoy was now 30 miles west of *Scharnhorst*, and every minute it stayed on its course, and Bey stayed on his, the two would draw further apart. The only explanation is that Bey felt that he had passed to the east of the convoy, and was now remedying that by turning towards the south-west.

The other problem Bey now faced was that by sending his destroyers out ahead of him, they were now out of visual range of the flagship. Johannesson had obeyed orders, and sped up when the battleship changed course, so his five destroyers were now spread out in line abreast, 10 miles ahead of the *Scharnhorst*, and steaming at 12 knots, on a south-westerly heading. Johannesson in *Z-29* was in the centre of the line. Finally, at 0820hrs, Bey had second thoughts. He ordered *Scharnhorst* to turn back onto a northerly

course again. For some reason, though, the change of course was never passed on to Johannesson and his destroyers. So, the battleship and the destroyers began pulling further apart. Strangely, if Bey had recalled his destroyers, he would have been in a superb tactical position, between Force 1 and the convoy. Not only would that have made contact with the convoy all but inevitable, but there would have been little Burnett could have done to prevent it happening. Even now, with Burnett's cruisers still 20 miles to the east, and the convoy a similar distance to the north-west, it looked like Bey had won the race.

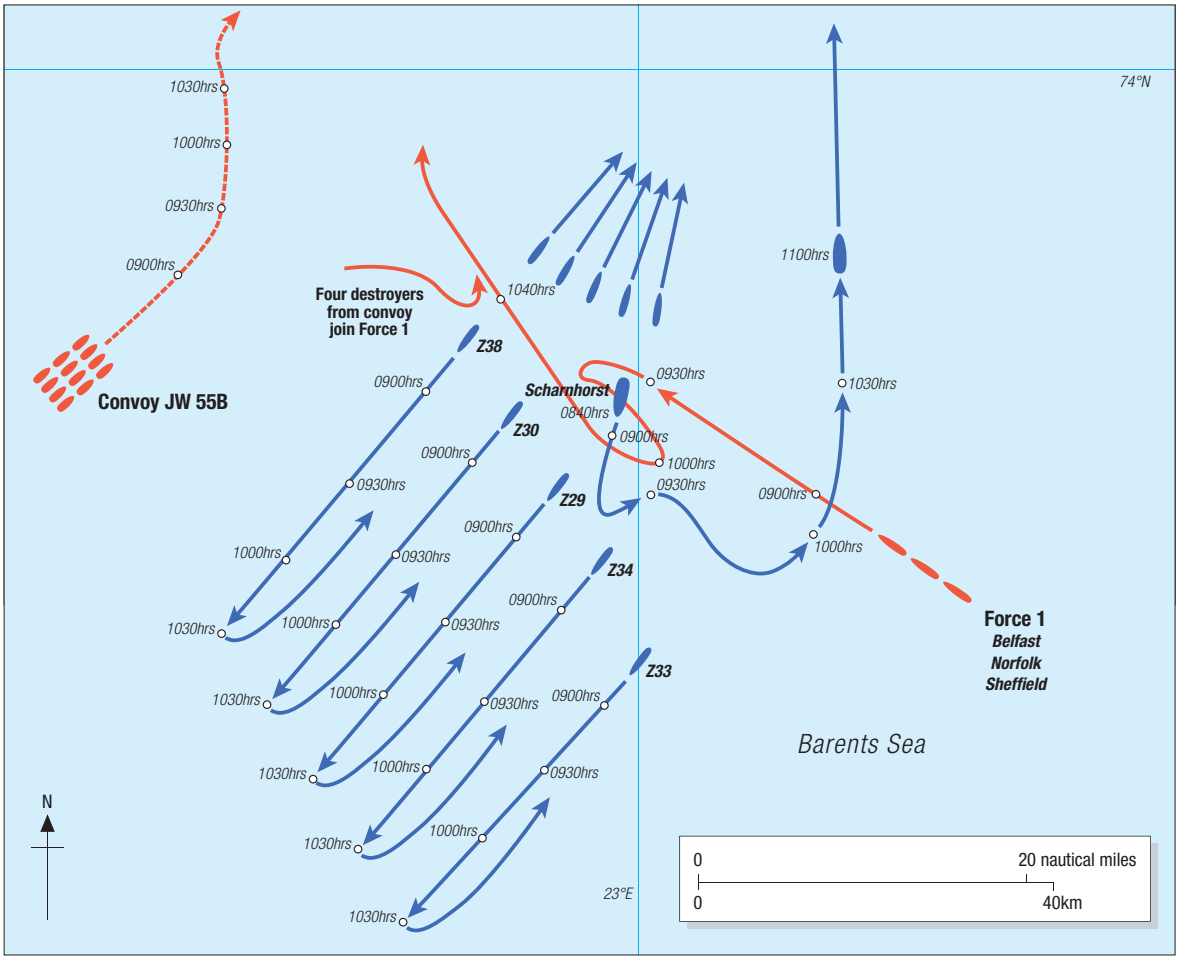
FIRST CONTACT

At 0815hrs, Vice Admiral Burnett turned his cruisers onto a north-westerly course of 305°, which meant his ships would eventually make contact with the convoy. It was around 50 miles to the west-north-west, on a north-easterly course. This little change of course was a precaution, in case the *Scharnhorst* was further north than Burnett anticipated. It was all guesswork, though – all the British calculations were based on the time the German battlegroup left the Altenfjord the previous evening. There were too many variables in play to be certain of anything. So, Burnett felt it was better to play it safe. At 0830hrs, *Scharnhorst* was heading north, and Johannesson's five destroyers were between 6 and 10 miles to the east of the battleship, strung out in an extended line, and heading towards the south-west. At that moment, with the convoy to the west of *Scharnhorst* and Burnett's Force 1 to the south-east, Bey had the upper hand.

This all changed four minutes later, at 0834hrs, when the radar operators on board *Norfolk* detected a 'jig' – a radar contact on their Type 273 surface search radar. It was at a bearing of 280° – just a little north of due east, at a range of 33,000 yards – 16½ miles. At the time, Force 1 was heading towards the north-west, and the jig appeared to be sailing north. The news was quickly signalled to *Belfast* and *Sheffield*. Then, at 0840hrs, the contact was picked up by *Belfast*, at a range of 17½ miles. Ten minutes later at 0850hrs, *Sheffield* picked up the jig, by which time the range had dropped to 15 miles, on a bearing of 278°. From the size of the contact, it was almost certainly the *Scharnhorst*. This was alarming news, as it meant that the German battleship was between them and the convoy. If it headed towards the north-west, it could fall on the poorly defended convoy in less than an hour's time. By now, though, all three British cruisers had acquired the target on radar, and were at action stations.

The lookouts could not see anything through the darkness, but the relative positions of the ships remained fairly static. Everyone with a pair of binoculars or ranging sight was peering ahead of their ship, hoping to be the first to sight the enemy. Then, shortly after 0850hrs, the radar operators on *Belfast* noticed that the jig had turned. It was no longer heading north. Instead, the contact was heading away from them, almost at right angles, towards the south-south-east. On board the *Scharnhorst*, Bey had, for some reason, decided to change course. Now, he was following behind his destroyers, unaware that Burnett's cruisers were coming up astern him in the dark. At 0904hrs, Burnett's three cruisers redeployed in an echeloned line, with the flagship *Belfast* to the north of it, and then *Sheffield* followed by *Norfolk* to the south-east of her, spread

Bey's initial attempts to reach the convoy, 26 December 1943



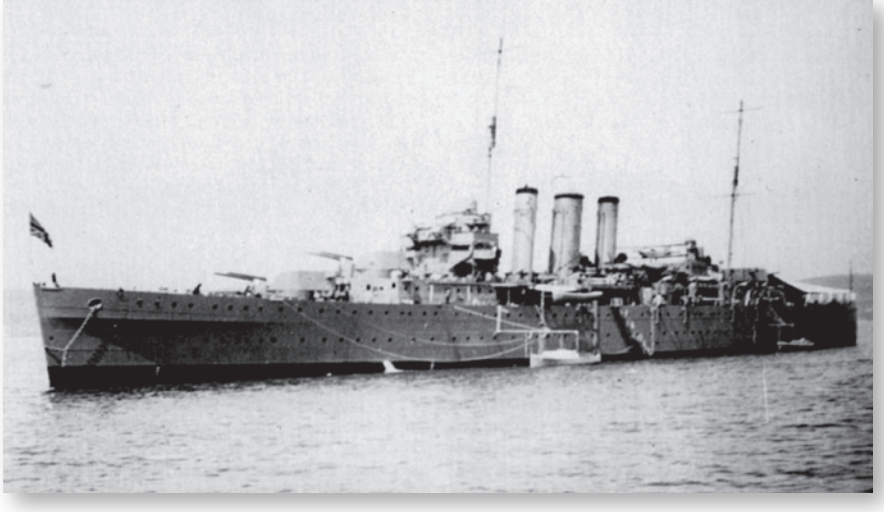
out over 2 miles of ocean. That formation increased his chances of making a visual sighting, and spread his radar net out that little bit more widely. It also meant that all of the ships could fire ahead, or directly to port, without blocking the fire of the other cruisers.

By then, it was clear that *Scharnhorst* had turned away from the convoy. Just in case, though, Captain McCoy, commanding the Fighting Destroyer Escort for JW 55B, ordered his reinforcements – the four destroyers under Commander Fisher – to form a screen, 6 miles to the south-south-west of the convoy. This was in case the *Scharnhorst* altered course again, and headed back towards the north. At that critical moment, *Belfast* picked up another jig to the north-west, on a bearing of 299°, and a range of 12¼ miles. This caused some fleeting concern, until Burnett correctly surmised it was a destroyer from the convoy, deployed out to the south-east of the other ships. In all likelihood it was the *Virago*, one of Fisher's four-destroyer screen. Burnett ordered the crew to disregard the contact. All attention was now focused on the bigger jig to the south-west. The range had decreased steadily, and by 0915hrs, it was on a bearing of 250° from *Belfast* – towards the west-south-west, at a range of 6½ miles.

Burnett ordered his other cruisers to drop back slightly, onto a bearing of 160° from the flagship. The idea was to give the three cruisers a better angle of fire. Then, at 0921hrs, lookouts on board the *Sheffield* spotted a darker outline in the darkness, fine off the port beam. Moments later, the cry 'Enemy in sight!' was yelled out, followed by the bearing and range: 222°, 13,000 yards. When he heard the radio report, Burnett ordered Captain Frederick Parham of the *Belfast* to fire off a starshell on the bearing, using one of his 4in. guns. It arced up into the night, and a few seconds later, it burst, illuminating a patch of sea beneath it as it fell. In this patch of light was a large black shape: the *Scharnhorst*. That starshell was effectively the opening round of what became the Battle of North Cape. The crew of the *Scharnhorst* were clearly taken by surprise. Watchers on the British ships could clearly see that the battleship's main guns were still trained fore and aft. Their own guns, though, were already pointing at their target, and their crews were ready and waiting to open fire.

Commander Ralph Fisher, who commanded the detachment of the 36th Destroyer Division that was transferred from the homeward-bound convoy to bolster the defences of Convoy RA 55B. He led the final destroyer attack on the *Scharnhorst*, and won a Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) for his actions.

The starshell bursting was all the more surprising because *Scharnhorst* had not been using her radar. Although her own sets were inferior to the British ships' search radars, they should have been able to detect Burnett's cruisers at that range. However, in order to sneak up on the convoy undetected, Bey had ordered the battleship's two sets to be switched off, in case their emissions could be detected. The surprise was total. A second before, *Scharnhorst* had been the hunter. Now she was the prey. The other British cruisers fired starshells, too, but they did not manage to illuminate the target. However, several miles to the west, their glow was spotted from the German destroyers, which at the time were heading in the opposite direction. On board *Scharnhorst*, Bey reacted speedily, ordering Hintze to turn the



The heavy cruiser *Norfolk* was the only British warship to engage *Scharnhorst* during the battleship's clash with Force 1 on the morning of 26 December. She also engaged *Scharnhorst* early that afternoon, when she was hit, and X turret was put out of action.

FORCE 1 AGAINST THE *SCHARNHORST*, 0930HRS, 26 DECEMBER 1943 (PP. 54–55)

At 0834hrs on 26 December 1943, the heavy cruiser *Norfolk* detected the *Scharnhorst* using her search radar. *Norfolk* and the light cruisers *Belfast* and *Sheffield* formed Force 1, commanded by Vice Admiral Burnett, who flew his flag in the *Belfast*. At 0921hrs, lookouts on board *Sheffield* sighted the *Scharnhorst* through the intervening squalls of sleet and snow, at a range of 6½ miles. A number of starshells were fired to illuminate the German battlecruiser, which was taken completely by surprise.

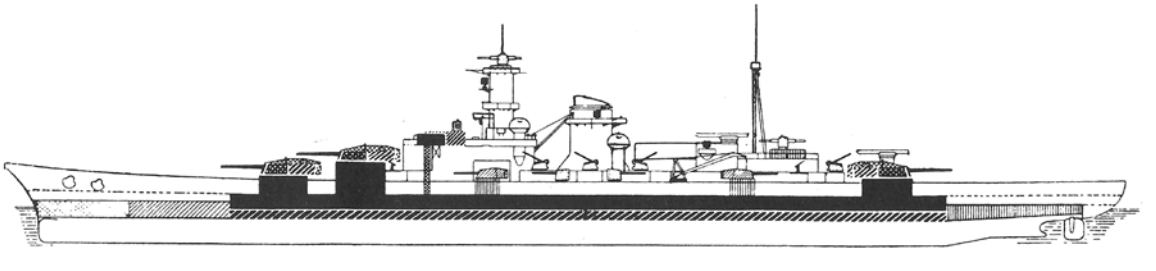
Moments later, *Norfolk* (**1**) opened fire on *Scharnhorst* (**2**) with her 8in. guns. Kapitän zur See Hintze of *Scharnhorst* turned his ship about, until she was steaming on a parallel course to the British cruisers, but due to the poorer light to the north – behind the cruisers – her gunners found it difficult to target her assailants. At the time, Burnett's cruisers were deployed in echelon, with *Norfolk* being closer to the German battleship than her consorts. So, due to *Scharnhorst*'s change of direction, the guns of the light cruisers were blocked by *Norfolk*. The British heavy cruiser was using conventional rather than flash-free charges, and so her gun flashes were especially bright. Her gunnery was good, guided by a combination of visual and radar direction. At 0932hrs, she straddled *Scharnhorst* with her third salvo at a range of 5 miles. One of her 8in. shells hit the German battleship just abaft the funnel (**3**). This brief encounter only lasted ten minutes, then *Scharnhorst* slipped away in the darkness. Throughout the skirmish, she never fired back, as despite the flashes of *Norfolk*'s guns, the German gunnery direction team had no clear target.

battleship to port, onto a new course of 150°. The battleship and the cruisers were now on what were almost reciprocal courses, with the British heading towards the north-west and the *Scharnhorst* towards the south-east.

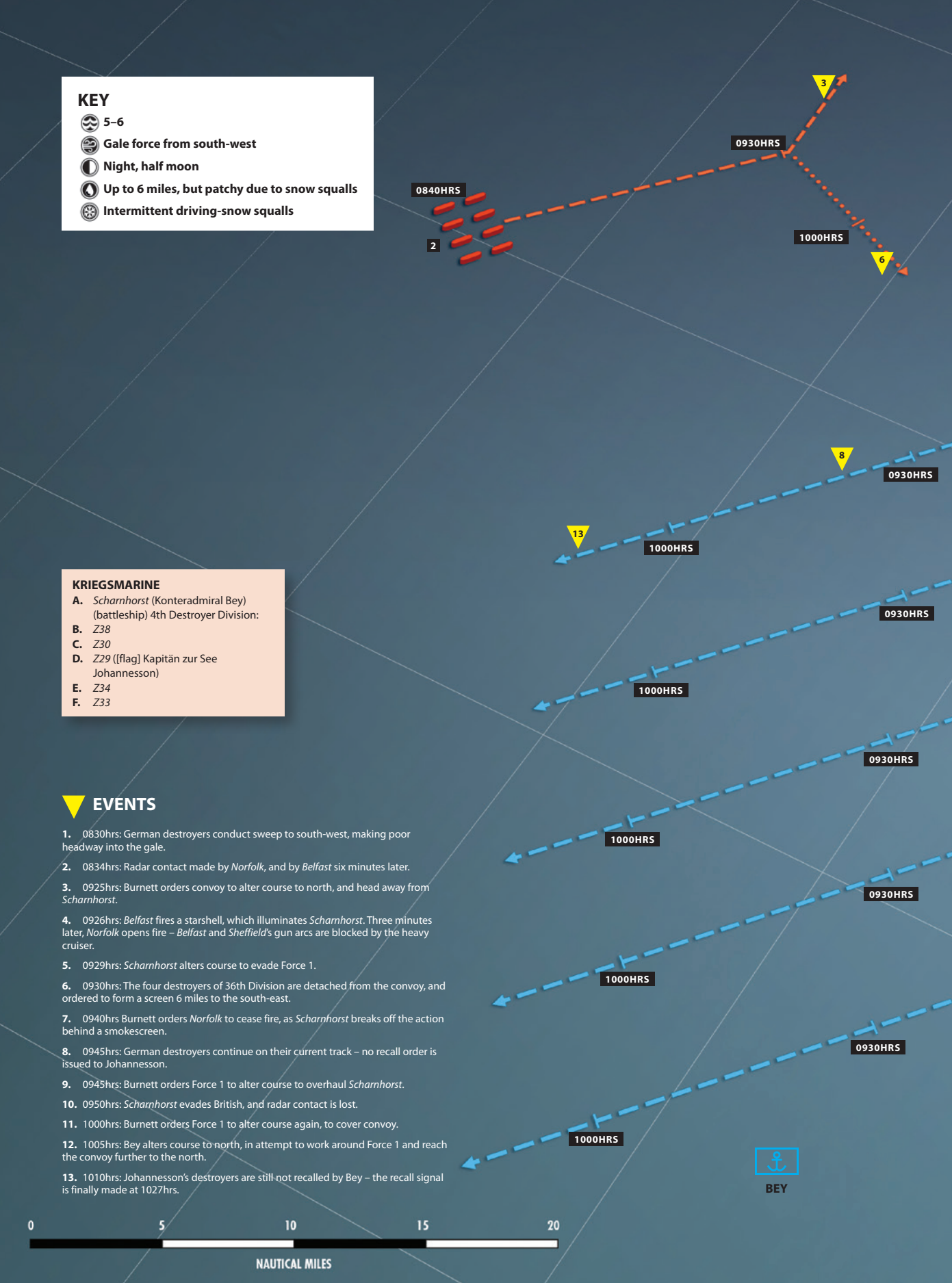
At 0929hrs, *Norfolk* – the nearest of the British ships – opened fire with a full salvo of her eight 8in. guns. By then, the range was 9,800 yards – a little under 5 miles. Unfortunately for Burnett, due to the *Scharnhorst*'s change of course, the heavy cruiser was now masking the guns of *Belfast* and *Sheffield*. Only *Norfolk* had a clear arc of fire. Her first salvo fell 500 yards astern of the battleship. Also, unlike the other British cruisers, *Norfolk* was not using flashless powder, so in the darkness, for a few seconds, the blast all but blinded the observers in the light cruisers. On board *Norfolk*, the gunnery control team quickly recalibrated the target's range and bearing, then fired again. Meanwhile, Burnett ordered *Norfolk* to 'Drop back – clear my range', but moments later, he changed his mind. Instead, he would turn his whole formation. So, he ordered the cruisers to turn simultaneously to port, onto a new heading of 265°. This was a little south of due west – enough, he hoped, to let *Belfast* and *Sheffield* join in the fight.

By now, the range was increasing steadily as the *Scharnhorst* sped off towards the south-east. Only *Norfolk* was firing at this point – the other two cruisers still had their guns masked by their consort, while on *Scharnhorst* the gunnery direction teams were still working out the firing calculations. *Norfolk* fired six salvos that morning. On *Belfast*, observers were pretty sure her third salvo hit its target. Philip Welby-Everard, the cruiser's first lieutenant, put it thus: 'I saw a flash as I watched her salvo fall.' Captain Donald Bain, commanding the *Norfolk*, was more emphatic: 'We were the first to sight the enemy, we were the first to open fire, and we were the first to score a hit.' On board *Scharnhorst*, Obermaat Wilhelm Gödde saw the enemy firing at them, and afterwards recalled: 'I couldn't see the ship that was firing at us – all I saw were the orange flashes every time a new salvo was fired'.

Then, the battleship was hit – just as Bain had claimed. In fact, she was hit twice, the first shell landing on the upper deck, just aft of the funnel, and the second striking the foremast. The first shell penetrated the upper deck and plunged into a messdeck, but it did not explode. It started a fire, though, that was quickly put out. The second hit was more serious. One man was killed, and several men were wounded, including an officer who lost his foot. The shell, though, destroyed the ship's forward radar array, as well as the port anti-aircraft director. This was a serious blow to a ship trying to fight in the Arctic darkness. *Scharnhorst* carried a second radar array further aft, but it had a limited sweep, and an effective range of just 12,000m. *Norfolk* kept firing – the other cruisers never managed to fire a salvo – but it seemed *Scharnhorst* never fired back. One survivor claimed that the aft Caesar turret

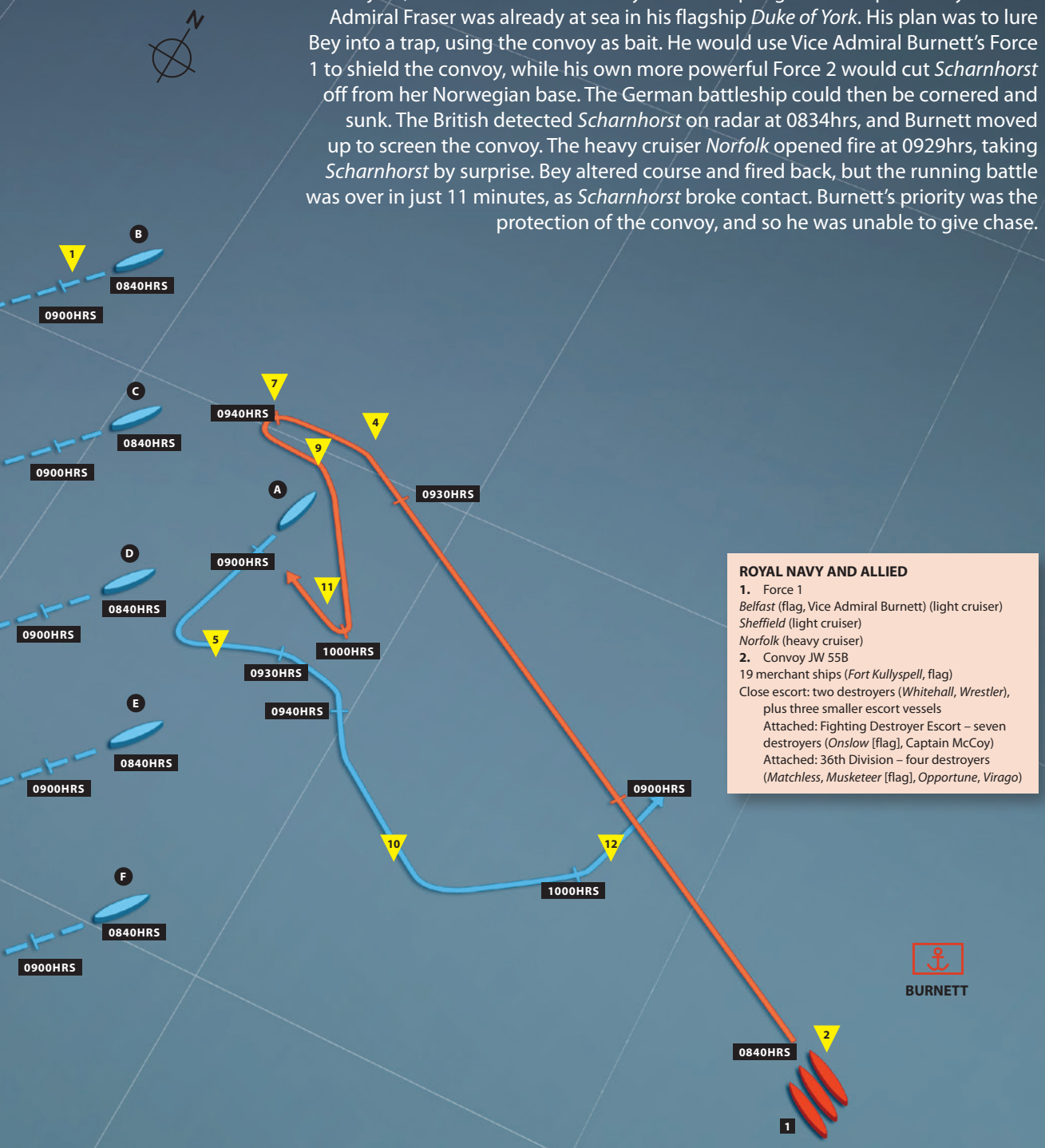


Scharnhorst was extremely well protected by hardened Krupp steel armour. This was concentrated in the areas shown in black in this profile. A slightly thinner armoured belt extended below her waterline, while her bow and stern were less extensively protected.


KEY
5–6
Gale force from south-west
Night, half moon
Up to 6 miles, but patchy due to snow squalls
Intermittent driving-snow squalls
KRIEGSMARINE
A. Scharnhorst (Konteradmiral Bey) (battleship) 4th Destroyer Division:
B. Z38
C. Z30
D. Z29 ([flag] Kapitän zur See Johannesson)
E. Z34
F. Z33
EVENTS
1. 0830hrs: German destroyers conduct sweep to south-west, making poor headway into the gale.
2. 0834hrs: Radar contact made by Norfolk, and by Belfast six minutes later.
3. 0925hrs: Burnett orders convoy to alter course to north, and head away from Scharnhorst.
4. 0926hrs: Belfast fires a starshell, which illuminates Scharnhorst. Three minutes later, Norfolk opens fire – Belfast and Sheffield's gun arcs are blocked by the heavy cruiser.
5. 0929hrs: Scharnhorst alters course to evade Force 1.
6. 0930hrs: The four destroyers of 36th Division are detached from the convoy, and ordered to form a screen 6 miles to the south-east.
7. 0940hrs Burnett orders Norfolk to cease fire, as Scharnhorst breaks off the action behind a smokescreen.
8. 0945hrs: German destroyers continue on their current track – no recall order is issued to Johannesson.
9. 0945hrs: Burnett orders Force 1 to alter course to overhaul Scharnhorst.
10. 0950hrs: Scharnhorst evades British, and radar contact is lost.
11. 1000hrs: Burnett orders Force 1 to alter course again, to cover convoy.
12. 1005hrs: Bey alters course to north, in attempt to work around Force 1 and reach the convoy further to the north.
13. 1010hrs: Johannesson's destroyers are still not recalled by Bey – the recall signal is finally made at 1027hrs.
0840HRS
2
3
0930HRS
1000HRS
6
8
0930HRS
13
1000HRS
0930HRS
1000HRS
0930HRS
1000HRS
0930HRS
1000HRS
0930HRS
1000HRS
BEY
0
5
10
15
20
NAUTICAL MILES

THE DEFENCE OF THE CONVOY, 0834–1015HRS, 26 DECEMBER 1943

The British were aware that the *Scharnhorst* and five destroyers had sailed from the Altenfjord, and that Rear Admiral Bey was attempting to intercept Convoy JW 55B. Admiral Fraser was already at sea in his flagship *Duke of York*. His plan was to lure Bey into a trap, using the convoy as bait. He would use Vice Admiral Burnett's Force 1 to shield the convoy, while his own more powerful Force 2 would cut *Scharnhorst* off from her Norwegian base. The German battleship could then be cornered and sunk. The British detected *Scharnhorst* on radar at 0834hrs, and Burnett moved up to screen the convoy. The heavy cruiser *Norfolk* opened fire at 0929hrs, taking *Scharnhorst* by surprise. Bey altered course and fired back, but the running battle was over in just 11 minutes, as *Scharnhorst* broke contact. Burnett's priority was the protection of the convoy, and so he was unable to give chase.



ROYAL NAVY AND ALLIED

1. Force 1
Belfast (flag, Vice Admiral Burnett) (light cruiser)
Sheffield (light cruiser)
Norfolk (heavy cruiser)
2. Convoy JW 55B
19 merchant ships (*Fort Kullyspell*, flag)
Close escort: two destroyers (*Whitehall*, *Wrestler*), plus three smaller escort vessels
Attached: Fighting Destroyer Escort – seven destroyers (*Onslow* [flag], Captain McCoy)
Attached: 36th Division – four destroyers (*Matchless*, *Musketeer* [flag], *Opportune*, *Virago*)

returned the British fire as the battleship sped away to the east, but this is not supported by any other account from either side.

By then, Burnett had decided to give chase. At 0938hrs, he ordered all three cruisers to turn onto a new heading of 105° – a little south of due east. That almost amounted to a complete reversal of course. Still, he felt it was important to keep after *Scharnhorst*, and drive her further from the convoy. The whole situation had worked out surprisingly well for him. The Germans had slipped between him and his charge – convoy JW 55B. Now, though, thanks to Bey's alteration to the south-east, Force 1 was securely between the *Scharnhorst* and the convoy. *Scharnhorst* was now heading almost directly away from the convoy at 24 knots. The British cruisers were making 16 knots – their progress hampered by having to turn into the wind amid such rough seas. By the time *Norfolk* fired her last salvo at 0940hrs, the range had increased to 24,000 yards – 12 miles – and the German battleship was no longer visible to anyone other than the cruiser's rangefinder operators. To obscure things even more, Kapitän zur See Hintze began laying smoke, which spread out like a white cloud astern of the battleship.

Captain Bain stopped firing because his chances of hitting the target were now almost non-existent. The other cruisers were not even within effective range. On their radar plots, the British were able to see the *Scharnhorst* pull away from them, and moved towards the extreme range of their radar sets. By 1000hrs, it was clear that she had broken contact, and escaped into the darkness. Given that *Scharnhorst* had disappeared to the west, Burnett had no other option. He had to call off the chase, and turn back to protect the convoy. He fully expected the German commander to find another way to reach the convoy, and he had to be in a position to defend it, rather than chasing off into the darkness in pursuit of an elusive prey. So, at 1000hrs, he ordered Force 1 to resume a north-westerly course of 305°, which would put her on track to intercept the convoy in about 90 minutes.

Meanwhile, a brief report of the encounter had been passed to Admiral Fraser, on board the *Duke of York*. He realized that while *Scharnhorst* might have been driven off for the moment, she would probably try to reach the convoy again. There was also the question of the destroyers that had reportedly been accompanying her when she left the Altenfjord. Had they returned home due to the rough weather, or were they still out there, and stalking the convoy? He decided to remain cautious. So, at 0929hrs, at the same moment as *Norfolk* opened fire, Fraser sent a signal to Rear Admiral Boucher, ordering him to turn the convoy towards the north. This was duly done, although it took time to shepherd all the merchant ships onto their new heading. Then, at 0937hrs, he ordered Fisher's four destroyers to detach themselves from the convoy's escort, and head towards the south-east to join up with Force 1. That would give Burnett a little extra muscle in his fight with the *Scharnhorst*. That done, all Fraser could do was to wait for news, and to keep heading towards the scene of the battle.

On board the *Scharnhorst*, Konteradmiral Bey was asking questions, too. He had not expected those enemy warships to be there, and while he suspected they were only cruisers, nobody had really seen them clearly. First, he ordered *Scharnhorst* to turn towards the north-east, steering 045°. That would give him another chance to attack the convoy later that morning. Then he remembered Johannesson's destroyers. He sent a radio signal asking for an update. The destroyer commander replied, giving his position, course

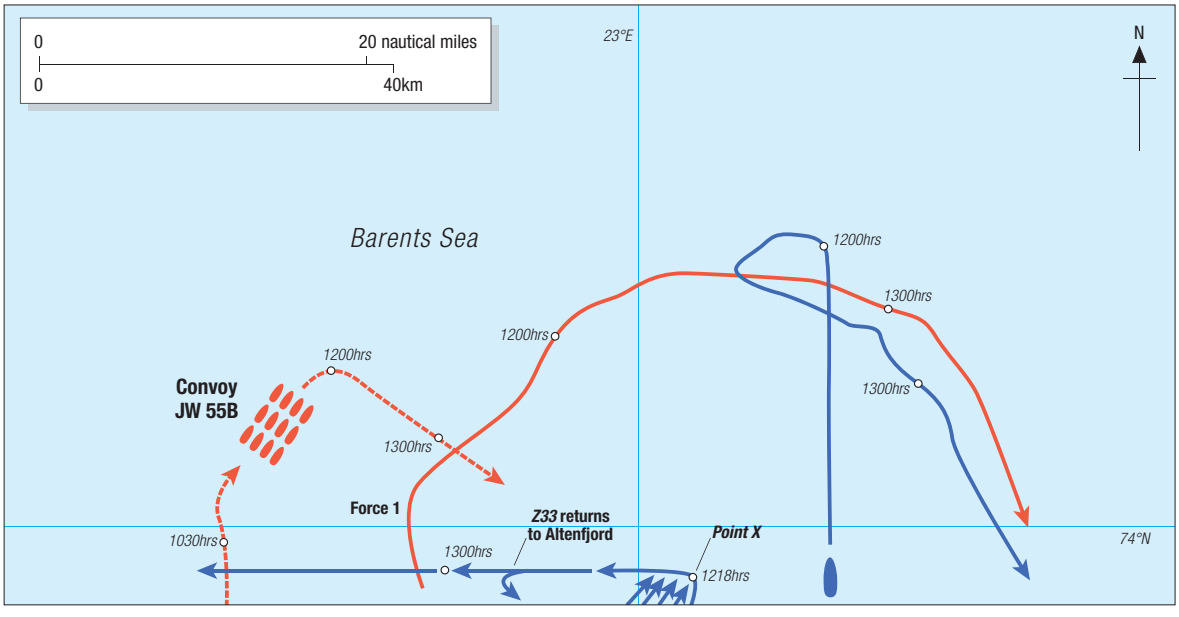
A German Type 36A (Mob) Narvik-class destroyer of the kind that accompanied the *Scharnhorst* during Operation *Ostfront*. With a few exceptions, these carried five 15cm (5.9in.) guns in one twin and three single turrets, but these made the vessel top-heavy, and dramatically degraded their seakeeping qualities.

and speed. That underlined the point that they were heading in the opposite direction to *Scharnhorst*, and were now about 24 miles away to the south-west. Bey should have recalled them immediately. For some reason, though, the signal was not sent until 1027hrs, by which time the gap between the destroyers and the battleship had widened to more than 40 miles.

Bey's next move was to tell his superiors what had happened. He sent a signal to Kapitän zur See Peters in Narvik, to be passed on to Admiral Schniewind, stating: 'Under fire from probably cruiser with radar.' So, they now knew that he had been in action with some sort of British covering force. On board the battleship, Hintze tried to put a brave face on things. He made an announcement, claiming, 'We are trying once more to get at the convoy, the destroyers from the south, we in the *Scharnhorst* from the north.' This sounded like a sensible plan, but of course Bey had left it too late to coordinate an attack with Johannesson's destroyers. Now, it would almost certainly be up to the *Scharnhorst* alone to carry on with the attack. Bey had one piece of good news, though. A sighting report from *U-277* said that at 0925hrs, the convoy had been sighted and was heading due east. In fact, this was a mistake. What the U-boat had seen was Commander Fisher's destroyers. However, it helped convince Bey that if he worked around to the north and then the west, he could reach the convoy.

Finally, at 1027hrs, Bey signalled Johannesson, ordering his destroyers to turn around. This time, with the gale astern of them, and steering 070°, they were able to make 25 knots. Now they had a chance to rejoin the *Scharnhorst*, if she was not also heading northwards, at a similar speed.

Bey's further attempts to reach the convoy, 26 December 1943 (cf. p.52 map)



Bey must have realized that the cruisers he encountered had been screening the convoy, which was therefore somewhere to the north-west of him. This guided the thinking behind his makeshift plan of attack. If all went well, the setback of the morning could be overcome, and they could well avoid the enemy cruisers altogether, and fall on the convoy itself. Incidentally, it was only at 1035hrs that Burnett signalled Fraser, to say that he had lost contact with *Scharnhorst*, which was now heading north. He added that he was rejoining the convoy. Fraser was clearly disappointed by this, signalling: 'Unless touch can be regained by some unit, there is no chance of my finding enemy.' In other words, after Burnett's cruisers broke contact, it was Bey rather than Burnett or Fraser who held the initiative.

BEY'S SECOND ATTEMPT

What followed was a worrying time for the three admirals. In *Belfast*, Burnett was plagued by doubt over his actions. His duty, though, was clear. His primary mission was to protect the convoy, and anyway, in those rough seas his cruisers would find it impossible to keep up with the *Scharnhorst*. Fraser's disappointed signal did not help. Burnett, though, had done the right thing – leaving the convoy unprotected when both *Scharnhorst* and her destroyers were still at large would have invited a disaster. On board *Duke of York*, Fraser, although equally concerned, was for now too far away to intervene. He had done what he could – redirecting the convoy and detaching the four destroyers of the 36th Division. Now, all he could do was wait. As for Bey, he was currently heading away from his destroyers, and the chances of carrying out a coordinated attack with Johannesson now seemed slim. The best he could hope for was to work his way around the British cruisers, and attack the convoy from the north-east.

The destroyer *Onslaught* formed part of the Fighting Destroyer Escort of Convoy JW 55B. During the morning of 26 December, she was redeployed to the north-east of the convoy, in case the *Scharnhorst* brushed past Force 1 and pressed home her attack on the merchant ships.

At 1024hrs, Commander Fisher's four destroyers made contact with Force 1. It had been a tough half an hour for them, running at full speed, beam-on to a gale. Now, Burnett deployed them in a screen a mile ahead of him, and continued on towards the north-west. The convoy now was about 10 miles to the west, on a northerly course. Burnett was close enough to see the convoy on radar, but far enough to the east of it to head *Scharnhorst* off, should she appear. However, at 1030hrs, Boucher ordered it to turn by increments onto its old heading of 045°. This took a while to complete, but it eventually settled on its new course at around 1050hrs. By that time, the cruisers and destroyers of Force 1 were firmly located by the escort's radar, off the convoy's starboard beam. It was now steering a course of 325°, and making 12 knots. The worry lay in where *Scharnhorst* was, and what Bey planned to do next.

Meanwhile, Admiral Fraser had worries of his own. At 0900hrs, three Blohm & Voss BV-138 flying boats took off from Bardufoss near Tromsø, and flew north in an extended search pattern. At 1010hrs, the westernmost plane picked up a radar contact 20 miles to the west. The three planes moved closer and shadowed the contact for 90 minutes, sending in sighting reports. By then, they had identified that it contained several vessels, and one of them was 'large'. These warships were on a course of 080°, and making 25 knots. It was Fraser's Force 2. It was not until 1340hrs that this report was passed on to Kapitän zur See Peters in Narvik, who relayed it to Admiral Schniewind. He agreed with Peters that this was possibly a British covering force, and might well contain a battleship. However, this crucial sighting report, first made at 1010hrs, did not reach Bey for another four hours. In that time, Force 2 had drawn a hundred miles closer to its quarry. By then, it was too late for Bey to do much about it.

Bey knew nothing of this at noon, when he ordered *Scharnhorst* to turn to port, onto a new heading of 225°. She was now heading towards the south-west, on a course which Bey hoped would bring him into contact with the elusive convoy. He knew that Johannesson's five destroyers were somewhere to the south. In fact, at 1027hrs, he had ordered them to reverse

Burnett's flagship *Belfast* was in action against the *Scharnhorst* three times on 26 December, and engaged her with both guns and torpedoes. She survived the war, and is now a floating museum ship, berthed in London, close to Tower Bridge.

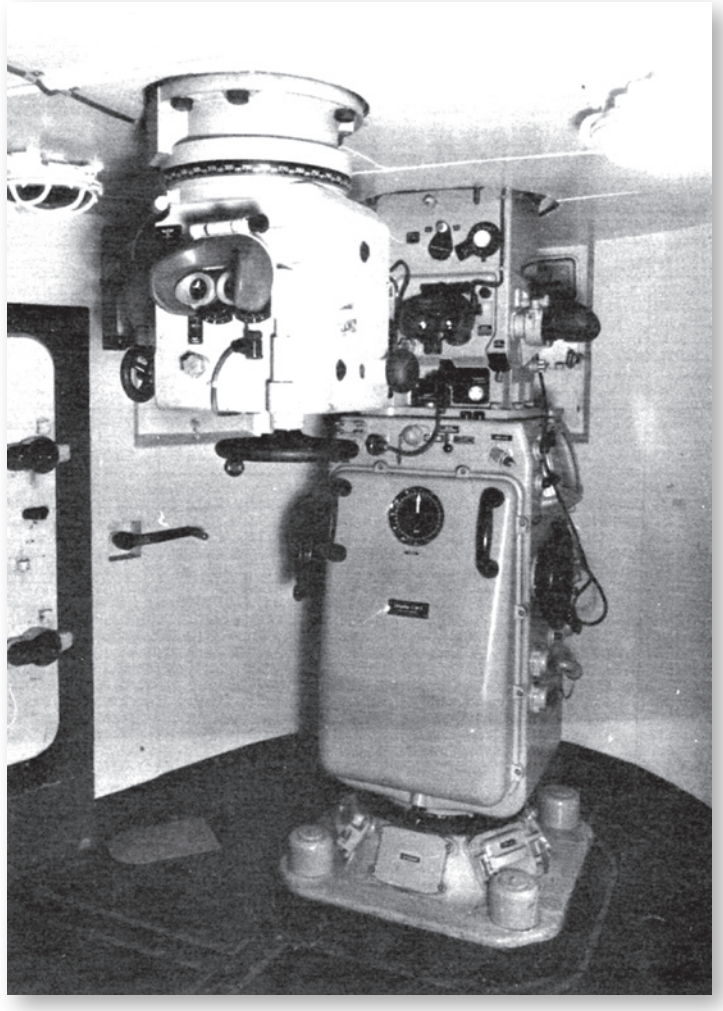
course, and head back towards the north-east. Then, he ordered Johannesson to reach a spot he designated 'Force X' by 1218hrs. That would place them approximately 20 miles to the south-west of the battleship – close enough to carry out a coordinated attack on the convoy. Bey and Johannesson were now in radio contact with each other, and at the time, this did not seem an unfeasible scheme.

However, all this uncertainty ended at 1204hrs, when *Belfast*'s Type 273 set picked up a jig to the east-north-east, at a range of 13 miles. There was little doubt this was the *Scharnhorst*. The contact was then picked up by *Sheffield* and *Norfolk*, and finally by Fisher's four destroyers. At that moment, the cruisers were in line astern, with the flagship in the lead. The destroyers were in the same formation, 2 miles ahead of *Belfast*. The whole of Force 1 was steering 045°, and making 18 knots. This time, Burnett had no intention of blocking the arcs of fire of any of his cruisers. He turned his ships onto a new heading of 100°. That meant all of his cruisers could fire, and the *Scharnhorst* was approaching them at right angles. At 1221hrs, Burnett ordered a starshell to be fired from the flagship. Once again, *Scharnhorst* was caught unawares. On board her, Matrosen-Gefreiter Günther Sträter recalled that the captain had just ordered the lookouts to be diligent when the starshell burst overhead. He added: 'Shortly afterwards, the shadowy outlines of the British ships came into view.'

Watching from the bridge of the *Belfast*, Captain Frederick Parham recalled of *Scharnhorst*: 'She looked extremely large, and extremely formidable.' Then, Burnett gave the order to open fire. The range was just 5½ miles. All three cruisers opened fire, and one German crewman later described the British fire as 'unpleasantly accurate'. Still, despite the range, conditions were far from favourable, with both cruisers and target pitching and rolling heavily. The *Norfolk* later claimed to have achieved at least one hit at 1224hrs, and an orange flash was seen on the battleship's superstructure. Even the British destroyers were joining in with their own small guns. *Sheffield* also claimed a hit a minute later. By then, *Scharnhorst* had also brought her two forward 28cm (11in.) turrets into action, and

was targeting *Norfolk*, which, being a heavy cruiser, presented the greatest threat. Meanwhile, the German battleship turned hard to starboard. When she was fired on, she was steering 270° – due west – at 20 knots. Now, she was steering 135° – a south-westerly heading.

Some 9 miles away to the west, the starshell and then the flashes of gunfire were seen from the ships of JW 55B as the convoy continued on its new course of 125°, making 8 knots. Captain McCoy gathered his destroyers off the convoy's port side, in case they had to protect it from the enemy battleship. For the moment, though, there was nothing they could do but watch. By 1225hrs, the two sides were just 2 miles apart. *Scharnhorst* straddled *Sheffield* with the first salvo, and large chunks of shrapnel smashed into her superstructure, rupturing pipes and severing electrical cables. However, she was not the target, and the German gunnery teams adjusted their range. At 1237hrs, *Scharnhorst*'s third salvo straddled *Norfolk*, and a 28cm shell struck the base of X turret. It exploded against the barbette mounting, and jammed the turret, putting it out of action. On board *Sheffield*, Lieutenant Stan Walker saw a 'sickening red column of fire' erupt from the turret. A minute later, *Norfolk* was hit again, the shell exploding inside her hull, killing or wounding several men.



The interior of the fire control station on a German battleship. Although this station was on the *Bismarck*, the two positions in *Scharnhorst* were virtually identical. The space is dominated by a rangefinder periscope, and behind it is the gun director, with which the battleship's 28cm (11in.) salvos were controlled.

Fires were now blazing just above her engine room, but the stokers just put their gas masks on and stayed at their posts. Above them, the damage-control teams managed to put out the blaze. On *Scharnhorst*, Obermaat Gödde recalled shells falling around the battleship, but one of the enemy cruisers was burning fiercely: 'For a brief moment, a huge pillar of flame shot up, then died away.' He added: 'While we altered course, the enemy cruisers turned away and disappeared in the rain and snow squalls.' By now, Kapitän zur See Hintze had increased speed to 28 knots. It was not that Burnett's cruisers turned away – they were still pursuing *Scharnhorst*. It was the battleship that was outpacing them. By 1240hrs, the range between her and *Belfast* had increased to 6½ miles, and both sides were finding it increasingly difficult to target the enemy. Commander Fisher's destroyers tried to keep up, but *Scharnhorst* kept pulling away. Fisher had hoped to launch a torpedo attack, but due to the poor angles and ranges, as well as the heavy seas, the opportunity never presented itself. So, at 1241hrs, Burnett gave the order to cease fire. The battle had lasted 20 minutes.

THE CHASE

So, for the second time that morning, Konteradmiral Bey had been ambushed by Vice Admiral Burnett's cruisers. Both times, after a brief skirmish, the battleship turned away, increased speed and broke contact. This time, though, the action had been a little different. First, *Scharnhorst* was in a slightly better tactical situation, as her gunners could see the enemy cruisers silhouetted against the lighter southern horizon. By contrast, she was harder to see. Still, in those rough seas, and with driving sleet and snow, accurate gunnery was almost impossible, which accounts for the lack of telling hits by the British cruisers. The battleship was a more stable gunnery platform, but her record was little better. She, though, was using purely visual gunnery direction, as her remaining radar was not really up to the job. Afterwards, Bey was criticized by Dönitz for not being more aggressive, and brushing past the British cruisers to reach the convoy. Bey, though, knew that he had lost the initiative, as every time he made a move, he was thwarted by the British, who used their advantage in radar to keep him from the convoy.

Scharnhorst was now heading away from the convoy, making 24 knots, despite the wind and sea on her starboard beam. By now, the battleship's crew were tired, having been at their action stations all morning. Bey would have realized that making a third attempt at the convoy, and prolonging the fight, would push the endurance of *Scharnhorst*'s crew to the limit. So, at 1240hrs, he sent a signal to Kapitän zur See Peters in Narvik, to be passed on to Kiel. It read: 'Square 4133. Engaged by several opponents. Radar-directed fire from heavy units.' This was not strictly true – he was still only up against cruisers – but this signal revealed his frustration at the enemy radar's ability to see him in the dark. According to his orders from Admiral Schniewind, Bey could break off the attack if engaged by a more powerful enemy. He was now using that as an excuse to head for home.

Earlier that morning, though, Burnett's cruisers had broken off the pursuit, in order to protect the convoy. Now, Burnett knew the convoy was safe, and so he could give chase with a clear conscience. At 1300hrs, *Scharnhorst* had turned onto a new heading of 155°, a south-south-easterly course that would

The *Duke of York*, riding through a gale in the Barents Sea while providing distant cover to an Arctic convoy. She handled well in rough seas, though, and provided a stable gun platform for her ten 14in. guns. However, in these conditions she lacked the speed to overhaul the *Scharnhorst*.

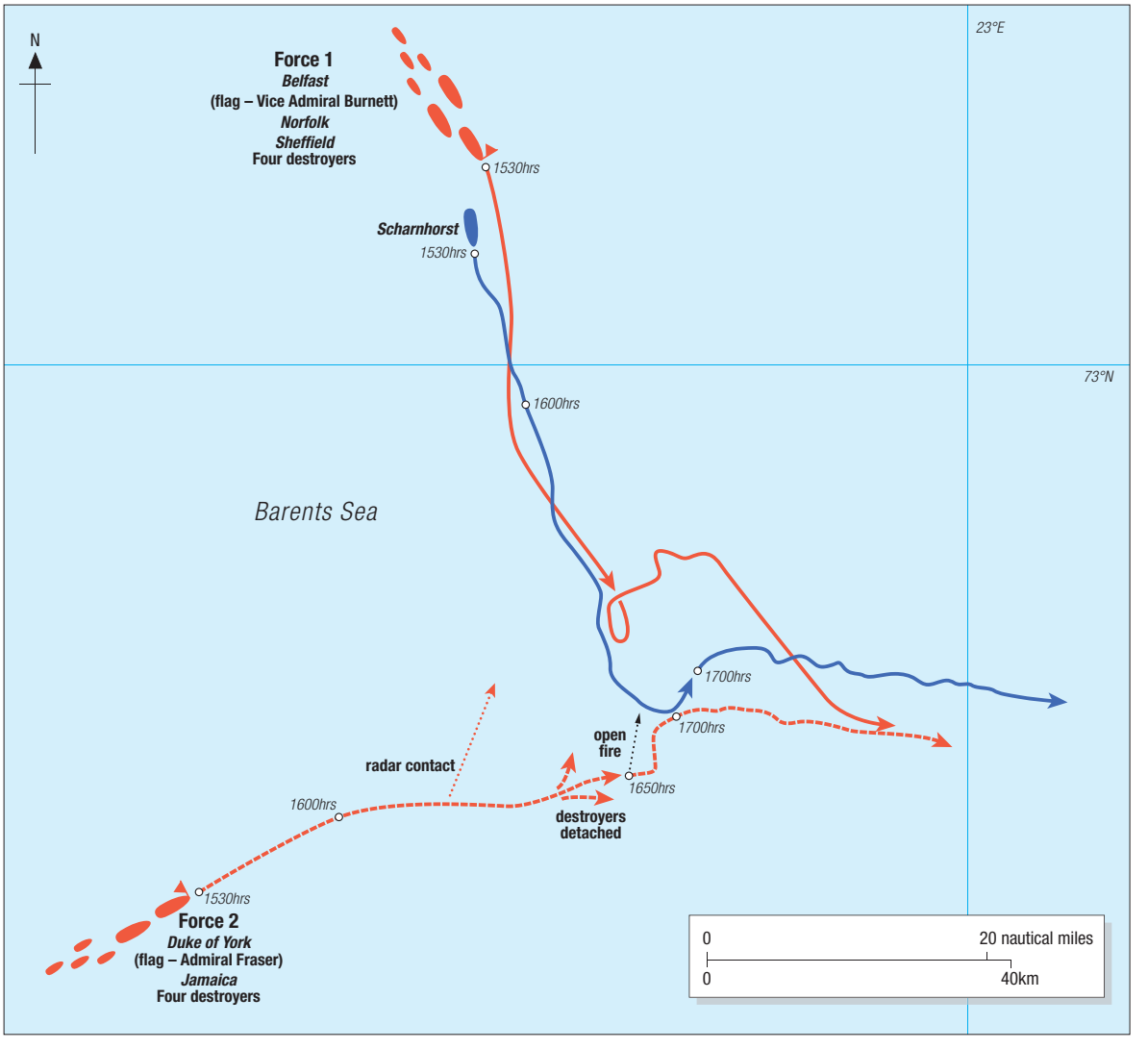
The British classed the *Scharnhorst* as a battlecruiser, due to her relatively light armament. The Germans, though, described her as a battleship, due to her superior armour. Given the ability of the ship to absorb damage, the latter term better reflected her power and capability.

take her directly to the Altenfjord. She was making 28 knots, despite the rough seas. Visibility was around 14,000 yards, or 7 miles, so Burnett was content to match her speed, and follow her just out of sight, 8 miles astern of her. Fortunately for Force 1, on that course the cruisers and destroyers found they could keep pace with the speeding battleship. In *Musketeer*, Fisher was concerned about speeding into the head sea, but he found he need not have worried. Later, he wrote: 'We slammed into it regardless, and found that once we'd passed a critical speed of 18 knots, she sailed over it like a speedboat zip-zipping, and leaving no time for falling into the holes.' He added, though, that on the destroyer's open bridge, 'the spray was fiercely stinging'.

It is ironic that if Bey had altered course a little and headed towards the south-west – directly into the gale – then the British warships pursuing the *Scharnhorst* would have had to reduce speed. Burnett estimated that his cruisers could only make 16 knots into the wind, while *Scharnhorst* could still make at least 25 knots. Within two hours radar contact would have been lost. Then, Bey could have altered course to the south-east, and headed towards the coast to the east of North Cape, which he would have reached at around midnight. By now, though, he realized he had a new threat to deal with. At 1330hrs, Peters in Narvik contacted the *Scharnhorst*, reporting that another naval force, including a large warship, had been sighted to the south-west. That was the first Bey knew about Force 2. The report dramatically altered the situation. Now, rather than simply heading home, pursued by British cruisers and destroyers, he knew that a second enemy force was at sea, to the west of the Altenfjord. What had been a simple chase had become altogether much more complicated.

All this while, Burnett and Fraser were in regular radio contact, exchanging reports on their progress and position. After news of the clash was passed to *Duke of York*, Fraser turned Force 1 onto a new course of 090° – due east. His intention was to cut *Scharnhorst* off from her base. He enjoyed a good overall picture of what was happening, thanks to Burnett's sighting reports. He knew where both British forces were, and the *Scharnhorst*, so he was able to plan accordingly. By contrast, Bey had only a rough idea where the two British forces were in relation to *Scharnhorst*. Meanwhile, he had one

The pursuit of *Scharnhorst*, 1530–1800hrs, 26 December 1943



other problem to deal with. At 1218hrs, just as *Scharnhorst* was about to run into Force 1, Johannesson and his destroyers had reached Point X, 18 miles to the south-south-east of the battleship. According to Bey's orders, the destroyers were to spread out into a line, and then head due west, searching for the elusive convoy. They were largely forgotten during the clash between *Scharnhorst* and the cruisers, and so they kept searching towards the west.

Johannesson never knew it, but at 1300hrs, the northernmost destroyer in the line was just 8 miles south of the convoy. Another mile to the north and she would have been in visual range of it. Instead, the destroyers maintained their course, and by 1340hrs, they were due east of *Scharnhorst*, which was racing southwards, 45 miles away. It might as well have been a thousand miles. By then, one of the destroyers, *Z-33*, had already become detached from the force, having developed engine problems. Johannesson ordered her to return directly to the Altenfjord. Finally, at 1420hrs, Bey signalled Johannesson, and ordered his destroyers to return to base. The flotilla

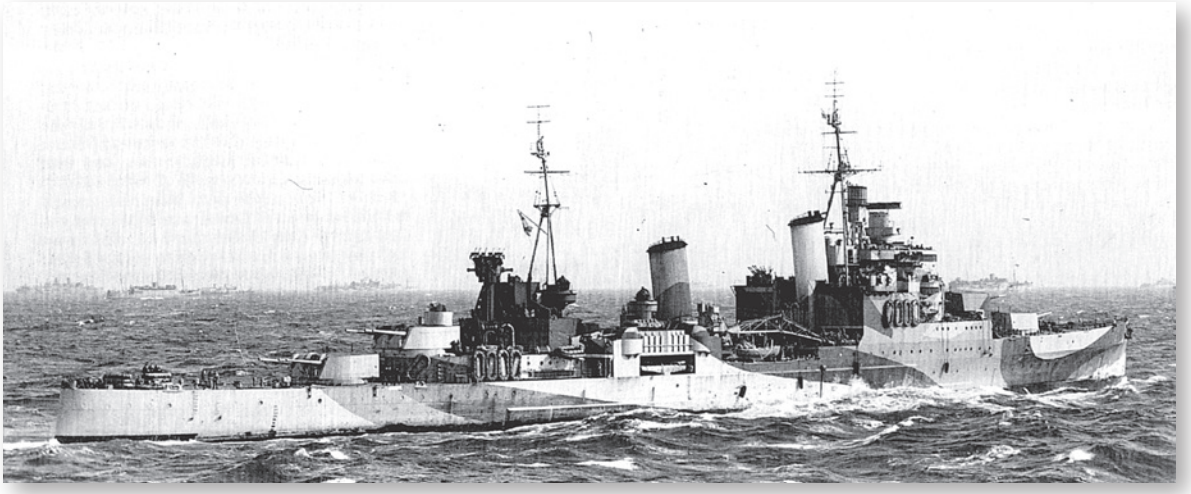
commander immediately altered course to the south, and his remaining four destroyers headed for home.

Ironically, at roughly the same moment, Convoy JW 55B was approaching Point X, some 40 miles east of their current position. If they had only loitered there, the convoy would have stumbled upon them. The voyage home was an uncomfortable one due to the gale, as these destroyers were poor sea boats. However, it was otherwise completely uneventful, apart from a brief request made at 1930hrs to assist *Scharnhorst*, which was apparently in action far to the east of them. This, though, was countermanded by Kapitän zur See Peters less than half an hour later, at 2013hrs. No explanation for it was given. The flotilla reached Point Lucie safely at 0100hrs the next morning, and after passing through the minefield and working their way down the Altenfjord, they reached their old anchorage in the Langfjord nine hours later. *Z-33* limped in shortly after noon. There, her crew learned the shocking news that they were the last ship of the battlegroup to make it back home.

On board the *Scharnhorst*, as the destroyers began their long voyage home, Kapitän zur See Hintze announced to the crew that their attack on the convoy had been broken off, and that they were returning to the Altenfjord. After that, everyone on board seemed to relax a little, as it seemed that the dangers they faced lay behind them. However, Force 1 was still shadowing them, just out of visibility range, and beyond the range of the battleship's remaining radar. The Type 273 sets on the British cruisers were working well, though, allowing Burnett to shadow his quarry without being detected. During the race to the south, *Norfolk* had fallen behind, due to the damage she had received during the skirmish that morning. Her search radar had also been knocked out, but it was repaired, as were her engines, and Captain Bain gamely raced on behind Burnett, in an effort to catch the flagship up. At 1430hrs, *Scharnhorst* altered course onto a new heading of 170°, probably in an attempt to avoid the enemy naval group reported to the south-west. Thanks to *Belfast*'s radar, though, this made no material difference to the situation.

Over to the south-west, that naval group – Admiral Fraser's Force 1 – was drawing closer. Fraser had made his dispositions, and now it was simply a matter of bringing *Scharnhorst* to battle. Fraser and his staff knew *Scharnhorst* was trapped. At 1417hrs, Fraser sent a signal to all ships: 'If enemy maintains present course and speed, action should be joined at 1630hrs.' So, everyone in the British ships knew that they expected to be in action in just over two hours. By contrast, the crew of *Scharnhorst* had no idea what lay in store for them. One officer on Fraser's staff described the situation thus: 'From here on in, it was an execution job.' That afternoon, everything seemed to be going according to plan. Meanwhile, Fraser sat on his flagship, puffing at his pipe.

Then, just 45 minutes before the expected moment of contact, *Norfolk* found herself in trouble. Her fire reignited, and she had to turn and run with the gale, to give her firefighters a better chance of putting it out. They managed to do this, and Captain Bain turned back to the south again. *Norfolk* raced after *Belfast*, and was able to rejoin her at 1700hrs. At 1610hrs, *Sheffield* also found herself in trouble. Her port turbine suddenly stripped its gearing, and so the port shaft had to be stopped. Her speed dropped to just 8 knots, and she fell behind. Although the engineers managed to repair the gearing, *Sheffield* had fallen too far back and would take no part in the battle that



The light cruiser *Sheffield* engaged *Scharnhorst* shortly after noon on 26 December, during the German battleship's second attempt to reach the convoy. However, engine problems meant she missed the final battle that evening.

lay ahead. The only consolation for Vice Admiral Burnett was that *Norfolk* was racing up behind him, eager to join in the fight. For the moment, Force 1 was reduced to just one light cruiser.

Then, 28 miles to the south of *Belfast*, the chase came to an end. At 1617hrs, the radar operators on *Duke of York* detected a jig on their Type 272 radar. It was at a bearing of 020° – a little east of due north – at a range of 46,000 yards, or 23 miles. This was pretty much the maximum range for the set. It was *Scharnhorst*. After tracking her for a few minutes, the situation was clear: with Force 2 steering a course of 080°, a little north of due east and making 25 knots, the German battleship was closing the range rapidly, almost at right angles to them. At roughly 1630hrs – the very moment Fraser had predicted – *Scharnhorst* would be well within gun range, and the British battleship would be crossing the T of her German opponent. In other words, all of the *Duke of York*'s ten 14in. guns could bear on *Scharnhorst*, but only the forward turrets of Bey's flagship could fire back. After an afternoon of fast steaming through a gale, Fraser's flagship was now in the perfect position to fire on a still unsuspecting *Scharnhorst*. The Battle of North Cape was about to reach its climax.

THE AMBUSH

As the closing speed of the two battleships was 1,400 yards a minute, the range dropped steadily. All the while, the *Duke of York*'s gunnery direction teams fine-tuned their calculations, based on the radar plot from the battleship's Type 284 radar, the set that provided dedicated, radar-guided fire-control information for the 14in. guns. At 1637hrs, when the two ships were 12 miles apart, Fraser ordered his accompanying destroyers to form up in two groups ahead of the battleship – *Savage* and *Saumarez* off the port bow, and *Scorpion* and *Stord* off the starboard one. When the time was right, Fraser would order them to carry out a torpedo attack. The light cruiser *Jamaica* followed astern of the flagship. A few minutes later, the battleship picked up *Belfast* on her radar. That meant Force 1 and Force 2 were now firmly in contact with each other. At 1642hrs, *Scharnhorst* was seen to turn slightly to port, onto a new heading of 140°. The gunnery teams reworked

their calculations, and Fraser turned Force 2 slightly to starboard, to keep his arcs of fire clear.

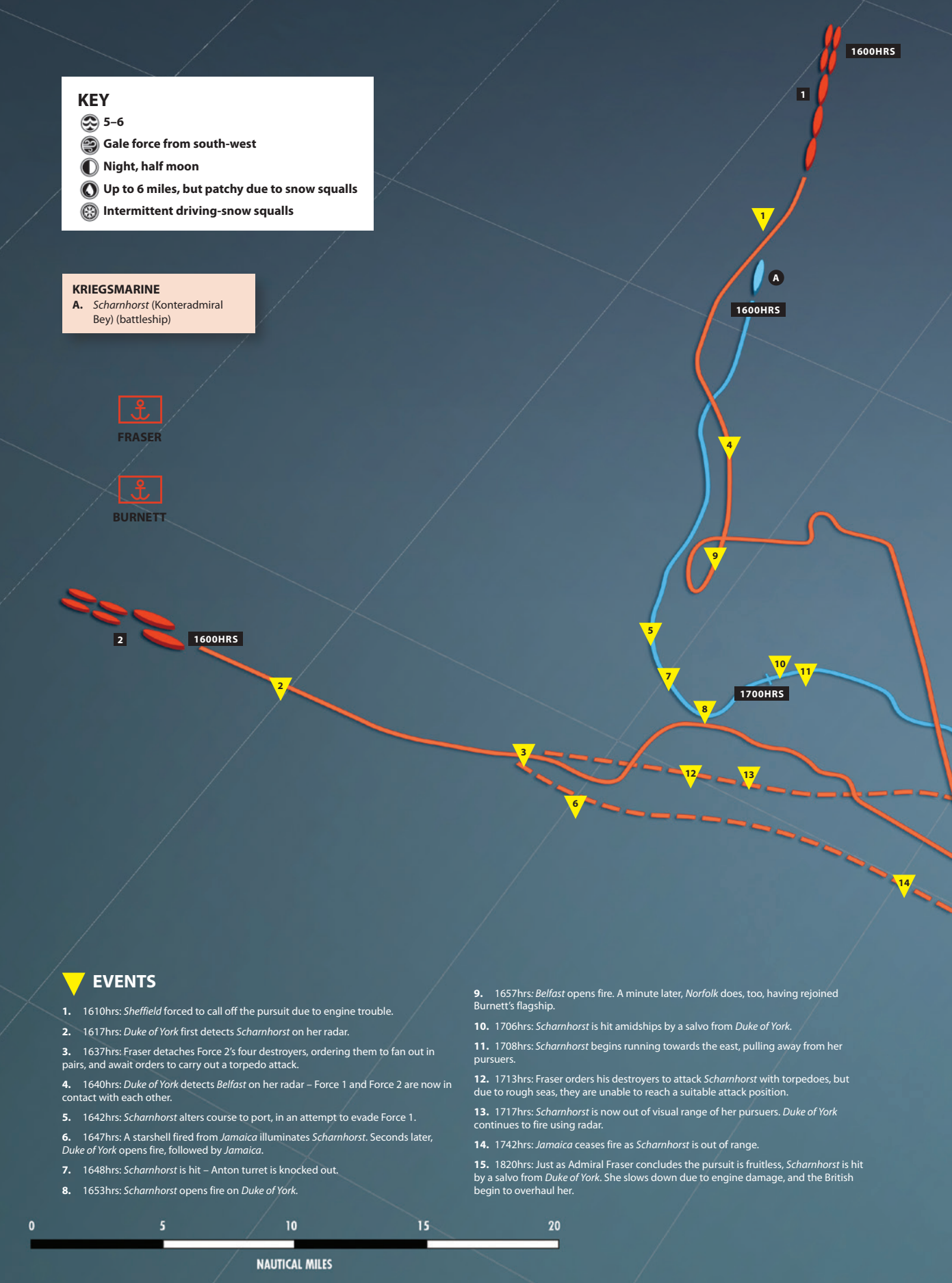
By now, the range had dropped to just 13,000 yards, or 6½ miles. Fraser decided it was time. So, at 1647hrs, he ordered Burnett in *Belfast* to illuminate *Scharnhorst* with a starshell. However, for some reason, it did not burn. So, the *Duke of York* fired four starshells from her own secondary guns. This time, the *Scharnhorst* was bathed in light. Once again, she was taken completely by surprise. Fraser, on the *Duke of York*'s bridge, could see that *Scharnhorst*'s main gun turrets were still trained fore and aft. Then, the British battleship opened fire. At that range, it took roughly 15 seconds for the shells to reach their target. When they landed, shell splashes 180ft high almost obscured the target. Observers on the *Duke of York* also saw a glow along the *Scharnhorst*'s waterline. It was an extremely accurate first salvo, and one of the ten shells had struck the starboard side of the battleship's forward turret. It had just started to rotate, but now it was jammed facing starboard. German survivors suggested that everyone inside the turret was killed or wounded.

The *Duke of York* survived the battle largely unscathed. However, one of *Scharnhorst*'s shells damaged her foremast, pictured here, and temporarily knocked out her search radar. Shell splinters also rained down on the battleship's superstructure and upper decks.

Moments later, *Jamaica* opened fire, and she managed to straddle *Scharnhorst* with her third salvo. Strangely, *Scharnhorst* remained on course for a few minutes, before she began turning away from her tormentors. Her own guns were now trained on the British battleship, and at 1653hrs, she opened fire with her two remaining turrets. The *Duke of York*'s guns kept firing, though, and *Scharnhorst* was hit again with the British battleship's third salvo. It struck the battleship just forward of Caesar turret – her after one – and a large spurt of flame was seen from observers on the *Duke of York*. All it did, though, was demolish the seaplane hangar, and start a fire, which was eventually extinguished. By now, after just a few minutes of battle, smoke was billowing from her forward turret, and a fire was raging around her after superstructure. *Scharnhorst* was suffering. Still, she was hitting back, and aided by her own starshells which burst over the *Duke of York*, her first salvo fell close to Fraser's flagship, showering her superstructure with shell splinters, and damaging her foremast, and with it her search radar.

This change of course at 1655hrs meant that *Scharnhorst* was now drawing a little closer to Force 1. So, *Belfast* had opened fire at 1659hrs, when the range was 9 miles. She was soon joined by *Norfolk*, which had steamed up astern of Burnett's flagship, to play her own part in the battle. So intent was *Belfast*'s bridge crew on the enemy battleship that *Norfolk*'s first salvo took them by surprise. *Scharnhorst* fired back using her port-side secondary guns. They drew closer, but the range to Force 2 was now increasing. Then, at 1708hrs, *Scharnhorst* turned to port, and was soon steering 111°, a little south of due east.

After ten minutes of fighting, *Scharnhorst* was now steaming at full speed, on a course which was roughly parallel to Force 2, and was pulling away



EVENTS

1. 1610hrs: *Sheffield* forced to call off the pursuit due to engine trouble.

2. 1617hrs: *Duke of York* first detects *Scharnhorst* on her radar.

3. 1637hrs: Fraser detaches Force 2's four destroyers, ordering them to fan out in pairs, and await orders to carry out a torpedo attack.

4. 1640hrs: *Duke of York* detects *Belfast* on her radar – Force 1 and Force 2 are now in contact with each other.

5. 1642hrs: *Scharnhorst* alters course to port, in an attempt to evade Force 1.

6. 1647hrs: A starshell fired from *Jamaica* illuminates *Scharnhorst*. Seconds later, *Duke of York* opens fire, followed by *Jamaica*.

7. 1648hrs: *Scharnhorst* is hit – Anton turret is knocked out.

8. 1653hrs: *Scharnhorst* opens fire on *Duke of York*.

9. 1657hrs: *Belfast* opens fire. A minute later, *Norfolk* does, too, having rejoined Burnett's flagship.

10. 1706hrs: *Scharnhorst* is hit amidships by a salvo from *Duke of York*.

11. 1708hrs: *Scharnhorst* begins running towards the east, pulling away from her pursuers.

12. 1713hrs: Fraser orders his destroyers to attack *Scharnhorst* with torpedoes, but due to rough seas, they are unable to reach a suitable attack position.

13. 1717hrs: *Scharnhorst* is now out of visual range of her pursuers. *Duke of York* continues to fire using radar.

14. 1742hrs: *Jamaica* ceases fire as *Scharnhorst* is out of range.

15. 1820hrs: Just as Admiral Fraser concludes the pursuit is fruitless, *Scharnhorst* is hit by a salvo from *Duke of York*. She slows down due to engine damage, and the British begin to overhaul her.

THE AMBUSHING OF THE *SCHARNHORST*, 1600–1820HRS, 26 DECEMBER 1943

During the afternoon of 26 December, *Scharnhorst* ran southwards towards North Cape, with Force 1 in pursuit. Rear Admiral Bey had lost contact with his destroyers, so the German battleship was on her own. Meanwhile, Admiral Fraser's Force 2 had been steaming east to intercept *Scharnhorst*, and at 1617hrs, Fraser's flagship *Duke of York* established radar contact with *Scharnhorst*. The two British forces closed in, and at 1647hrs, the German battleship was illuminated by a starshell. She had been taken completely by surprise – her guns were still trained fore and aft. Seconds later, the *Duke of York* opened fire, and scored a hit with her first salvo. Bey ordered *Scharnhorst* to escape towards the east, but by now she was under fire from four enemy warships, and pursued by destroyers. Still, her powerful engines gave her an edge in these rough seas, and she began to pull away from the British. By 1820hrs, the range had increased to 9 miles, and it looked as if *Scharnhorst* would escape. Then, a lucky long-range hit from *Duke of York*'s 14in. guns altered the whole situation.

ROYAL NAVY AND ALLIED

1. Force 1
Belfast ([flag] Vice Admiral Burnett) (light cruiser)
Sheffield (light cruiser)
Norfolk (heavy cruiser) (rejoined force at 1656hrs)
Attached: 36th Division – four destroyers (*Matchless*, *Musketeer* [flag], *Opportune*, *Virago*)

2. Force 2
Duke of York ([flag] Admiral Fraser) (battleship)
Jamaica (light cruiser)
Four destroyers (*Saumarez*, *Savage*, *Scorpion*, *Stord* [Norwegian])

The *Scharnhorst*'s 28cm (11in.) guns fired an armour-piercing shell weighing 330kg (727.5 lb) out to a maximum range of just over 40,000m (43,740 yards). Despite its high striking velocity, it could only penetrate the armoured belt of the *Duke of York* at a range of less than 10,000m (10,936 yards).

slightly from *Duke of York*. This meant that only Caesar turret could bear on her target. The range between the two battleships had increased to 8½ miles. Still, *Scharnhorst* remained clearly visible, and from the *Duke of York*'s bridge the battle to some looked like an amazing fireworks display, as starshells fired by both sides lit up the area, and the blaze of *Scharnhorst*'s guns could be seen firing. Matrose Helmut Backhaus, on *Scharnhorst*, later reflected: 'It was a terrifying sight. We were under fire from every direction. We seemed to be surrounded by enemy ships.' By now, though, Konteradmiral Bey and Kapitän zur See Hintze had recovered from the surprise ambush, and were doing whatever they could to save the battleship. They had been hit at least

three times, and one turret was knocked out, but they were still under full steam, and trying their best to escape from their pursuers.

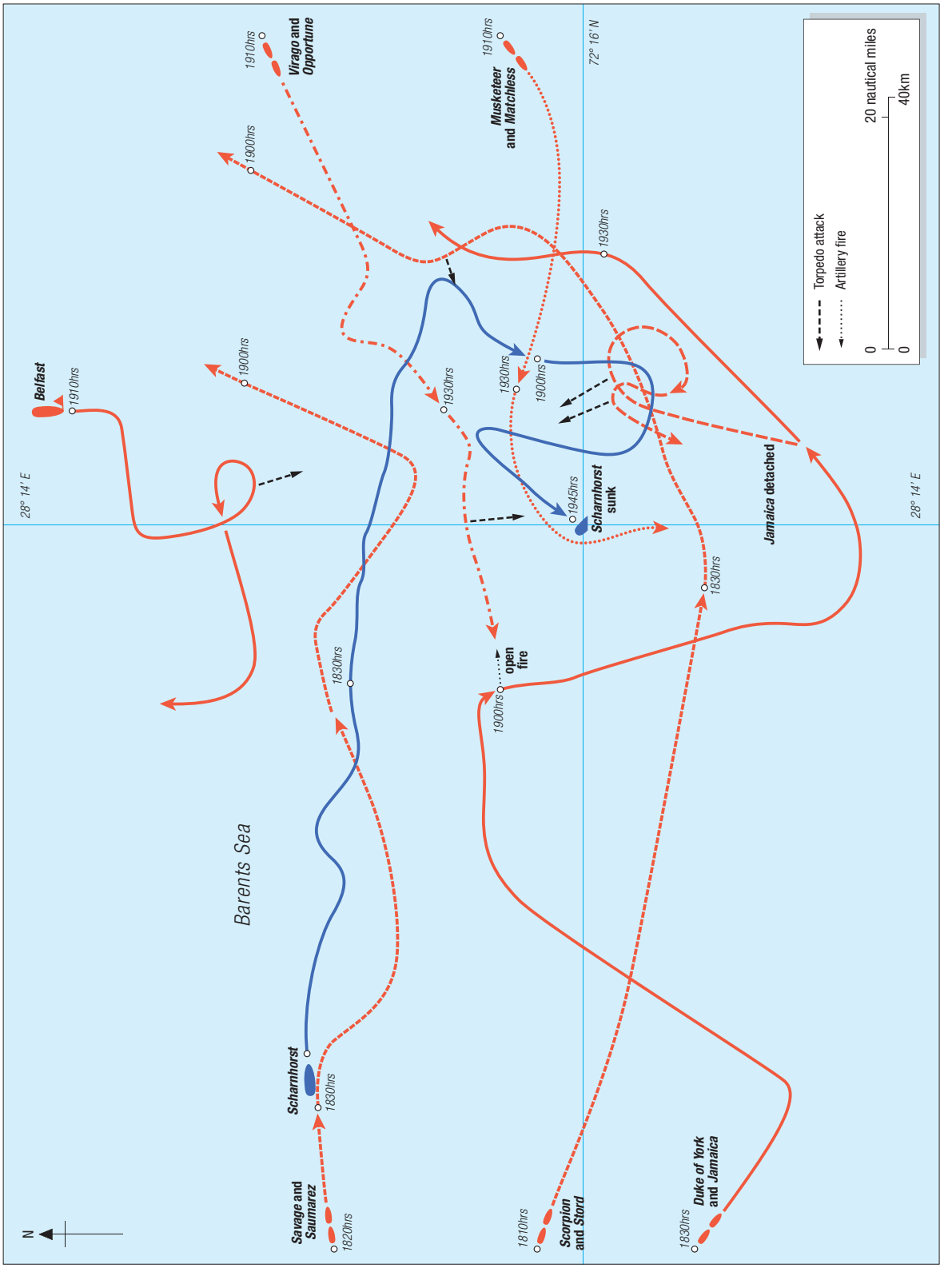
At 1655hrs, Bey had sent a signal to Kiel, forwarded through Narvik, which gave his position, and said simply: 'Heavy battleship – am in action.' That was an understatement, as she was being attacked by a battleship, as well as several cruisers and destroyers. In fact, at that moment, *Savage* and *Saumarez* had drawn so close to *Scharnhorst* that they had to turn away, to avoid being hit by friendly fire. Fraser had ordered them to hold back their torpedoes until he instructed them to attack. By 1713hrs, it was clear that *Scharnhorst* was drawing away. So, Fraser finally gave the order. By then, though, the seas were too rough and *Scharnhorst* was going so fast that the four destroyers found it impossible to overhaul the enemy battleship, and reach a suitable firing position. For now, it was all down to the two battleships, firing at each other at an ever-increasing range. The *Duke of York* scored another hit at 1715hrs, the shell exploding in a secondary gun magazine on the German battleship's starboard side. By now, though, the *Scharnhorst* was no longer in sight, and the British guns were firing using radar fire control. Unable to see their target, *Scharnhorst*'s gunners were only able to fire at the British gun flashes they saw through the darkness.

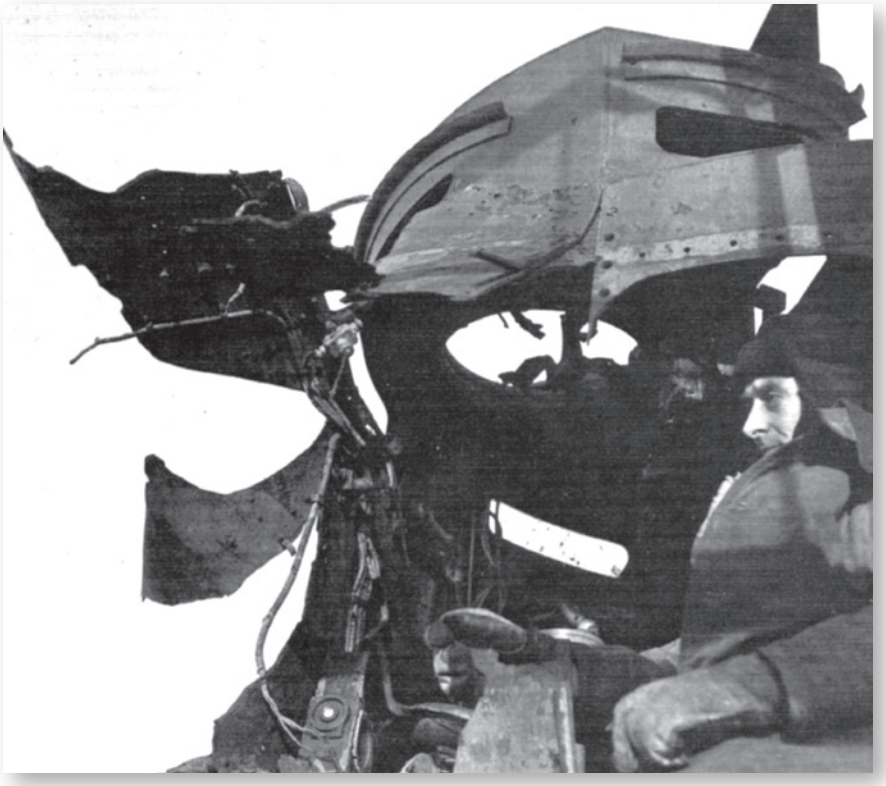
It was now clear that *Scharnhorst* was slipping away. At 1742hrs, *Jamaica* ceased fire, as *Scharnhorst* was now 8½ miles away, and beyond the effective range of her 6in. guns. The cruisers of Force 1 were even further behind, and Burnett had ordered them to cease fire as early as 1715hrs. So, it was up to the two battleships, exchanging fire at a target out of sight in the darkness. In theory, both battleships were still well within range of each other, and the *Duke of York* could fire using her radar at ranges of up to 15 miles. So, she kept firing, hoping for a lucky hit. On *Scharnhorst*, Bruno turret had briefly been put out of action, but with it working again, Hintze kept yawing his ship as he ran east, so that for a moment both of his working turrets could fire back in the general direction of her assailant. Any hits, though, by either side, were now simply a matter of luck.

By 1800hrs, *Scharnhorst* was too far away for the British radar operators to see the fall of their own ship's shells, and so both sides were reduced to peering into the darkness, looking for the flashes of the enemy's guns, and then firing along their bearing, at an estimated range. At 1819hrs, Bey sent another signal for Narvik to pass on to Schniewind in Kiel, which said: 'The enemy is firing by radar at a range of more than 18,000m. Position AC4965, course 110°, speed 26 knots.' Twenty minutes later, *Scharnhorst* ceased firing, as the chances of scoring a hit on the *Duke of York* were now improbably high. The British kept firing, although the range was now 19,000 yards, or 9½ miles. On the British flagship, the mood had become despondent: it looked as if the *Scharnhorst* was going to escape. Then, at 1820hrs, the near impossible happened: the *Duke of York* scored two hits.

The salvo straddled the German battleship, and a 14in. shell struck just forward of the bridge. It did very little real damage, apart from killing several men. The other shell, though, struck the *Scharnhorst* on the starboard side of her hull, just where it reached the upper deck, immediately aft of the funnel. The shell penetrated the armour, and exploded in the starboard machinery space. The starboard boiler was damaged, a crucial high-pressure steam pipe was severed and boiler pressure dropped rapidly. The battleship's speed immediately fell to 22 knots. Her engineers began trying to repair

The sinking of the *Scharnhorst*, 1800–1945hrs, 26 December 1943



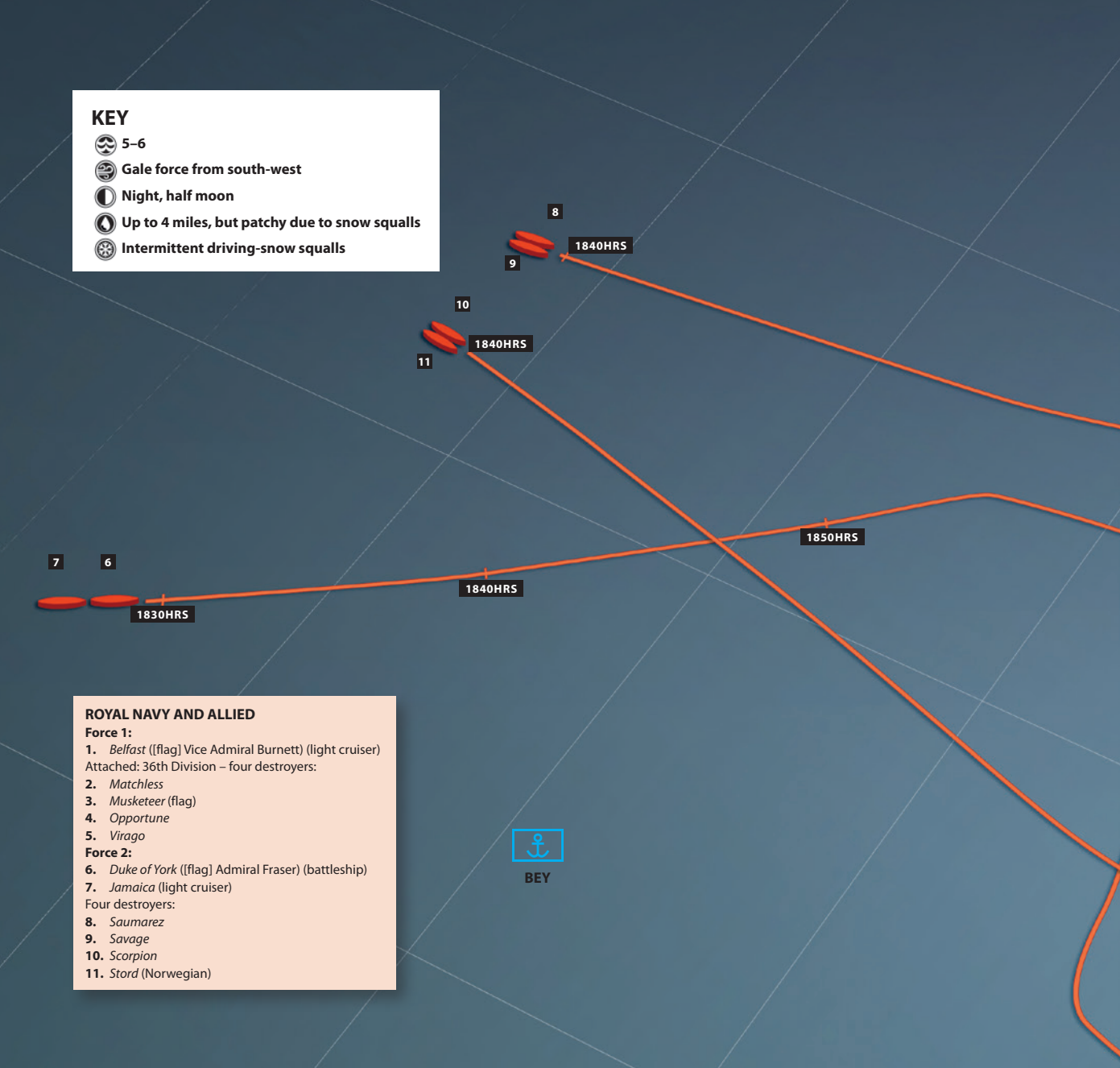


As it was preparing to carry out its torpedo attack on the *Scharnhorst*, the destroyer *Saumarez* was hit by a 28cm (11in.) shell. Although it passed through the gunnery direction tower, pictured here, it did not explode. However, splinters killed several crewmen, and put one of her engines and one of her torpedo launchers out of action.

the damage, but now the British had a real chance of catching up. On the *Duke of York* it took a while before this change of speed was noticed, as the Type 284 fire control radar broke down. In fact, at 1840hrs, Fraser signalled Burnett, saying: 'I see little hope of catching *Scharnhorst*.' He was about to break off the chase when it was noticed that on the other radars, the range was beginning to drop. The despondency on the bridge of the flagship soon changed to elation as they realized they were gaining on the enemy. Now, they had a real chance to finish off the *Scharnhorst*.

THE FINAL BATTLE

What followed was more of an execution than a battle. To the south-west of the *Scharnhorst*, the *Duke of York* and *Jamaica* were gradually beginning to overhaul her, even though the two sides were still too far away to see each other. To the north-west, *Belfast* and *Norfolk* were also approaching the German battleship, stalking her on their radar. Vice Admiral Burnett had already detached his four destroyers, with orders to work their way ahead of *Scharnhorst*, and then to carry out a torpedo attack. That would take time, though, and for the moment, it was up to the four destroyers attached to Force 2. Earlier that afternoon, Admiral Fraser had detached them, with orders to get in position to attack *Scharnhorst* using torpedoes. She had been outpacing them, but now they began to draw closer to their quarry. By 1830hrs, *Savage* and *Saumarez* were 6 miles astern of the battleship, while *Scorpion* and *Stord* were slightly further away to the south-west, off *Scharnhorst*'s starboard quarter.



ROYAL NAVY AND ALLIED

Force 1:

1. *Belfast* ([flag] Vice Admiral Burnett) (light cruiser)

Attached: 36th Division – four destroyers:

2. *Matchless*

3. *Musketeer* (flag)

4. *Opportune*

5. *Virago*

Force 2:

6. *Duke of York* ([flag] Admiral Fraser) (battleship)

7. *Jamaica* (light cruiser)

Four destroyers:

8. *Saumarez*

9. *Savage*

10. *Scorpion*

11. *Stord* (Norwegian)

EVENTS

1. 1820hrs: *Scharnhorst* is hit by a shell from *Duke of York*, and her speed drops.

2. 1852hrs: The destroyers *Scorpion* and *Stord* launch torpedoes at *Scharnhorst*, and score one hit.

3. 1853hrs: The destroyers *Savage* and *Saumarez* launch their torpedoes, and three hit. During the torpedo run, *Saumarez* is raked by German fire.

4. 1901hrs: After turning to port to clear her gun arcs, *Duke of York* opens fire on *Scharnhorst*, followed by *Jamaica*. The range is now just 5 miles.

5. 1915hrs: *Belfast*, approaching *Scharnhorst* from the north, opens fire with her 6in. guns.

6. 1919hrs: Fraser detaches *Jamaica*, to close with the damaged *Scharnhorst* and finish her off with torpedoes.

7. 1920hrs: Fraser orders his remaining four destroyers to carry out a torpedo attack. *Virago* and *Opportune* approach their target from the north-east.

8. 1922hrs: *Musketeer* and *Matchless* approach *Scharnhorst* from the east, but are now in danger of being hit by friendly fire. So, Fraser orders *Duke of York* to cease fire when the destroyers pass the flagship.

9. 1925hrs: Both *Jamaica* and *Belfast* launch torpedoes at *Scharnhorst*, but fail to hit her.

10. 1931hrs: *Virago* and *Opportune* launch their torpedoes, and at least three strike their target. *Scharnhorst* is now virtually dead in the water, and her guns are silent.

11. 1933hrs: *Musketeer* amd *Matchless* also fire their torpedoes, achieving one possible hit.

12. 1937hrs: *Jamaica* launches her remaining torpedoes at *Scharnhorst*, but the battleship is already heeling over to starboard. They strike her exposed port side, and *Scharnhorst* begins to settle in the water.

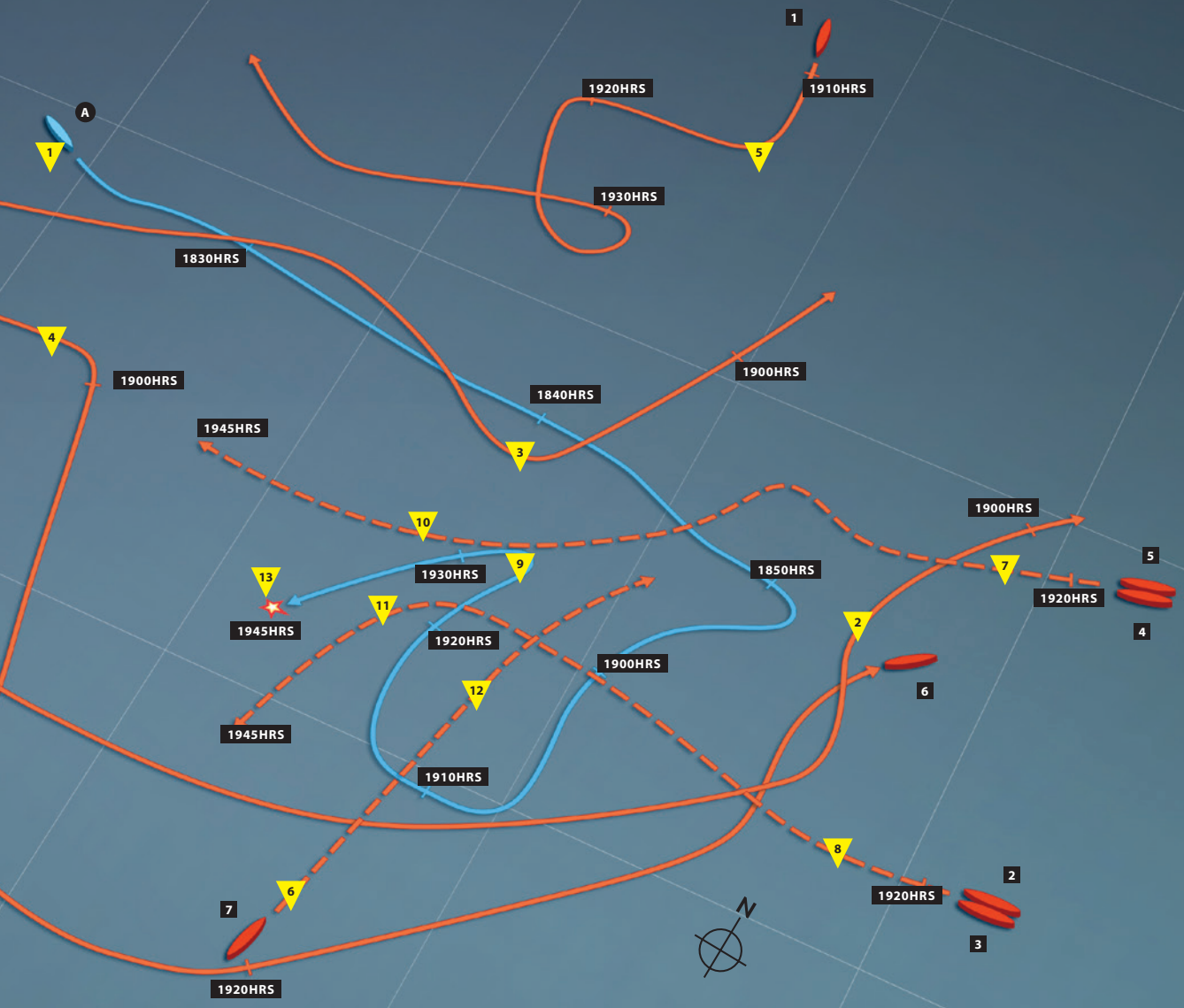
13. 1940hrs: On board *Scharnhorst* the order is given to abandon ship. The battleship heels over and sinks at 1945hrs, leaving hundreds of her crew in the freezing water. Only 36 of them will survive long enough to be rescued.

0 5

NAUTICAL MILES

THE SINKING OF THE *SCHARNHORST*, 1820–1945HRS, 26 DECEMBER 1943

A lucky hit by *Duke of York* slowed *Scharnhorst*, allowing Admiral Fraser's ships to close the range, and then cripple her. Eventually, *Scharnhorst*'s guns were silenced, and she finally sank at 1945hrs.



FRASER

BURNETT

KRIEGSMARINE

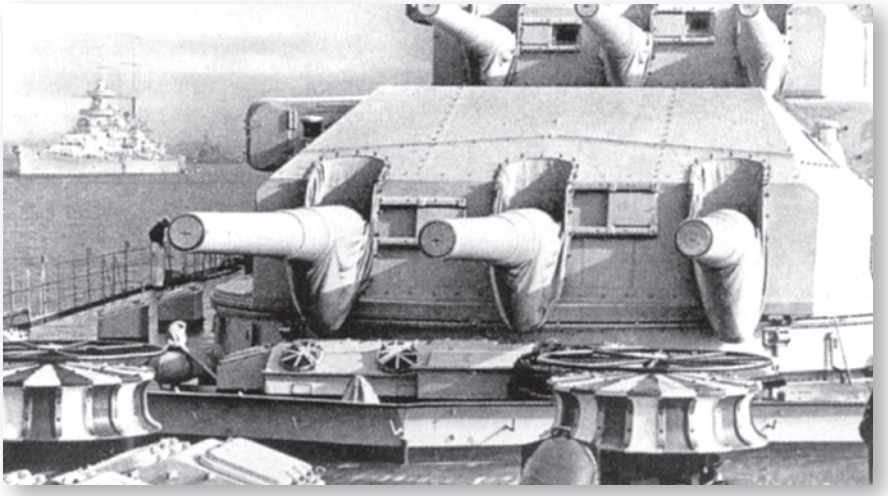
A. *Scharnhorst* (Konteradmiral Bey) (battleship)

From the *Scharnhorst*, they first appeared as shadows in the darkness. It was only when they came within 4 miles that the shadows astern were seen to be destroyers, closing in for the kill. Starshells were fired in their direction, and both Caesar turret and the after secondary guns began firing at these destroyers. When the range closed to 3½ miles, *Savage* and *Saumarez* began firing back with their forward 4.7in. guns. This was more a morale booster than anything else. *Scorpion* and *Stord* held their fire, but they too were spotted when they got within 3 miles of the *Scharnhorst*. It was clear that both pairs of destroyers were preparing to launch torpedoes, so at 1850hrs, Kapitän zur See Hintze turned *Scharnhorst* hard to starboard, to present a smaller target to the two destroyers on his starboard beam. She was now steering 220°, at full speed, towards the south-west. By this stage, *Savage* and *Saumarez* were 2 miles away to the west, while the other pair were less than a mile away to the east. Effectively, *Scharnhorst* was running between the two groups.

At 1852hrs, *Scorpion* and *Stord* launched their torpedoes – a spread of eight from each destroyer, at a range of 2,100 yards. On *Scorpion*, they were so close to *Scharnhorst* that as they got ready to launch, some wit shouted, 'out wires and fenders, port side' – the usual precautionary order when coming alongside another ship. *Scharnhorst*'s turn, though, threw off the torpedomen's aim, and of the 16 torpedoes, only one hit the battleship on her port side. Three miles to the west, and less than a minute later, *Savage* and *Saumarez* were also preparing to launch a spread. Just then, *Saumarez* was hit by a 28cm shell from *Scharnhorst*'s Caesar turret. It passed through her director tower without exploding, but splinters pierced the deck, destroyed a torpedo mount and caused havoc in the engine room. Eleven men were killed in that instant, and the destroyer's speed dropped to just 10 knots. Still, she was committed to the attack, and at 1853hrs, both destroyers launched their torpedoes – eight from *Savage* and four from *Saumarez*. That done, the two destroyers turned away towards the north-east. So, too, did *Scorpion* and *Stord*. Having launched their 21in. torpedoes, their part in the battle was done.

Of this last spread of torpedoes, three of them hit *Scharnhorst* along her starboard side – one near the bow, another amidships and the third near the stern. The last two did the real damage, causing extensive flooding and damaging the battleship's propulsion system. Once again, her speed dropped, this time to a mere 10 knots. Damage-control parties did what they could to stem the flooding and engine damage, but the *Scharnhorst* had now been struck by three torpedoes to both port and starboard in the space of two minutes, with a total of 3,240 lb of explosives. Matrose Backhaus recalled: 'A tremor ran through the ship, and she gave a great heave. It was like an earthquake.' From that moment on, the fate of the *Scharnhorst* was sealed. This, though, was only the start of her torment. A few miles away to the west, the *Duke of York* was preparing to open fire again, in order to pound the damaged German battleship into scrap.

At 1901hrs, the *Duke of York* turned to starboard to clear her after gun arcs, and then she opened fire. During the previous 40 minutes, her Type 284 fire control radar had been repaired, and her gunnery teams had been tracking *Scharnhorst*. Now, thanks to the flashes of her guns as they fired at the destroyers, they could see their target, too. The range was 10,400 yards – just under 6 miles. The British gunners straddled the *Scharnhorst*



Scharnhorst's forward 28cm gun turrets, Anton and Bruno. In the Battle of North Cape, Anton turret in the foreground was put out of action by a 14in. shell, fired as part of the *Duke of York*'s first salvo.

with their first salvo, and a bright glow was seen on the enemy battleship. At that range, it was hard to miss. Over the next 25 minutes, the *Duke of York* fired a full broadside into *Scharnhorst* every minute, and struck her with all but four of her salvos. From the bridge of Fraser's flagship, it looked like someone stoking a fire with a poker, as each shell produced a huge roar of flame.

The flagship was not the only British ship to open fire at *Scharnhorst*. *Jamaica* opened up, too, with her 12 6in. guns. Approaching *Scharnhorst* from the north, *Belfast* joined in at 1915hrs, first with her forward 6in. turrets, and then, after she turned to starboard, with her after ones, too. This meant that by that stage of the battle, *Scharnhorst* was being fired at by ten 14in. and 24 6in. guns. At these ranges, many of these shells were hitting her. What seemed remarkable, though, was that despite this battering, there is no real evidence that any of these shells penetrated her hull. Her armour was simply too thick, even for the *Duke of York*'s 14in. shells. However, above this armoured belt, her upper decks and superstructure were being pounded, as were her secondary gun turrets. In retrospect, it seems strange that while their shipmates were dying at their guns, many of those protected by the battleship's armoured citadel were unaware of just how bad things had become.

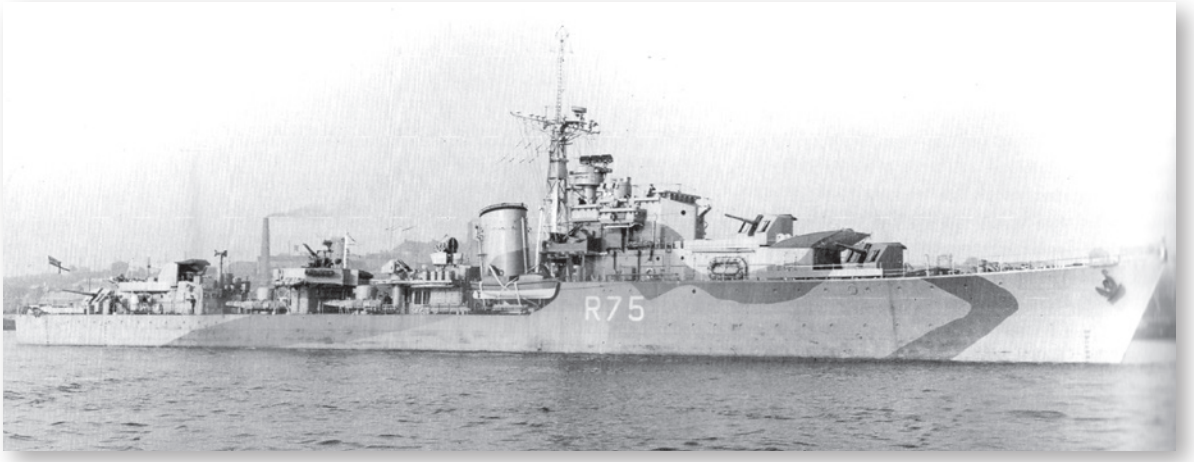
Still, as soon as the *Duke of York* opened fire, the German gunnery teams could see her, and so the *Scharnhorst*'s two remaining turrets began firing back. Anton turret had been knocked out at 1650hrs, and Bruno turret was only firing under local control, without the help of the battleship's complex gunnery direction system. At 1922hrs, the turret's ventilation system was destroyed, and conditions became nigh-on impossible inside it. So, only Caesar turret had been firing back at full effect. The problem now was that by 1930hrs, the guns had run out of ammunition. Survivors in the port 15cm turret recall a message reaching them from Kapitän zur See Hintze, stating: 'The heavy guns have been knocked out. Now it's up to you!' Still, with half of them knocked out, and their gunnery directors destroyed, there was little the remaining secondary guns could do. It was clear that the fight was all but over.

At 1920hrs, Hintze sent a last signal to Kiel: 'We shall fight to the last shell. Long live Germany. Long live the Führer.' By then, though, the last

THE SINKING OF *SCHARNHORST*, 1930HRS, 26 DECEMBER 1943 (PP. 82–83)

At 1820hrs that evening, *Scharnhorst* was straddled by a radar-guided salvo fired from the *Duke of York*. One of these 14in. shells penetrated the armoured citadel of the German battleship, and damaged one of her boilers. Consequently, the *Scharnhorst* was slowed down sufficiently for the British ships to catch up with her. She was now cornered, with *Belfast* and *Norfolk* to the north, *Duke of York* and *Jamaica* to the south-west and two groups of four destroyers heading towards her, one group from the east, and the other from the west. The destroyers approaching from the west attacked first, launching their torpedoes and scoring hits on the battleship on both her port and starboard sides. The *Duke of York* was also pounding the *Scharnhorst* with her 14in. guns.

Shown here is the situation at around 1930hrs. *Scharnhorst* is now ablaze (**1**), after receiving multiple shell hits to her superstructure. She is also listing slightly to starboard, after being hit there by three torpedoes. To the north, the light cruiser *Belfast* is firing at her with her 6in. guns, and has just launched a spread of torpedoes. So too has the light cruiser *Jamaica*, while to the east, the attacking destroyers have split into two groups and are preparing to launch their own torpedoes at the crippled battleship. Their impact, together with the second spread of torpedoes launched by *Jamaica*, will strike the final blow on *Scharnhorst*, causing her to immediately roll over onto her starboard side and start to sink.



In company with *Opportune*, the destroyer *Virago* launched seven torpedoes at the *Scharnhorst* at a range of just 1 mile. Her eighth torpedo malfunctioned and remained in its tube. Three of them struck the German battleship on her starboard side.

shell had almost been fired. A few minutes later, the order came to close all watertight doors. This suggested another torpedo attack was imminent. By now, the battleship had turned in a long loop to starboard, making 10 knots, and was listing slightly to starboard. She was heading north again, but Hintze saw the enemy's destroyers and cruisers closing in, and so called for another change of course, this time onto a south-westerly heading of 245°. However, there was nowhere to run. Now, it was just a matter of time.

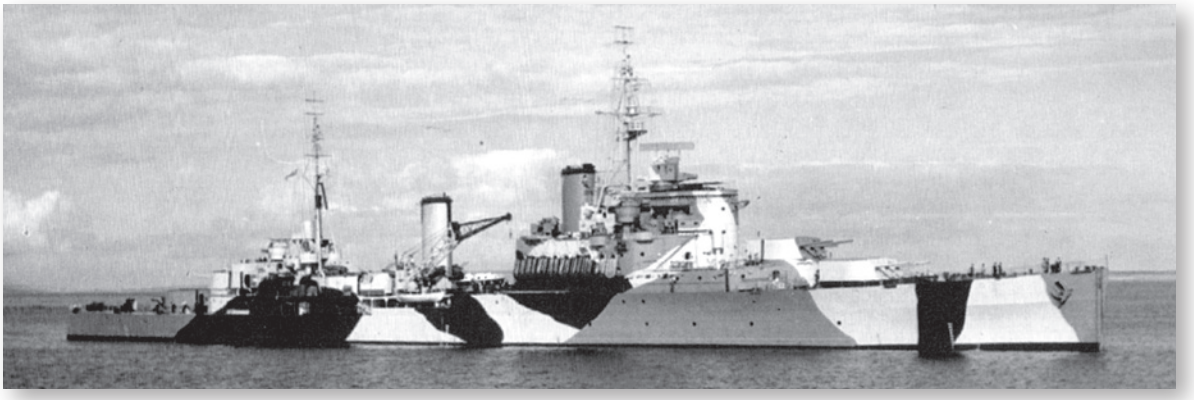
On board the *Duke of York*, Admiral Fraser had been watching his flagship pummelling the *Scharnhorst*, but realized that the shells were not making much impression on her well-armoured hull. So, like the *Bismarck* before her, *Scharnhorst* had been crippled, but still refused to sink. At 1919hrs, he ordered *Jamaica* to close with the enemy ship, and finish her off with torpedoes. At the same time, further to the north, Vice Admiral Burnett on board the *Belfast* had come to a similar conclusion, and ordered the cruiser to launch its torpedoes as well. Meanwhile, Commander Fisher's four destroyers had now reappeared in sight, having steamed in a wide loop to approach the *Scharnhorst* from the east. At 1920hrs, they were 6 miles to the east of the battleship, approaching her in two pairs. They too had orders to launch their torpedoes at her.

Jamaica settled on a parallel course to the *Scharnhorst*, heading north-north-east, 1½ miles off her starboard beam. At 1925hrs, *Jamaica* launched two torpedoes from her port launchers. Her third torpedo misfired. Meanwhile, two minutes after *Jamaica*, *Belfast* launched her own three starboard tubes, at a range of 2½ miles. However, *Scharnhorst*'s turn to port meant that these five torpedoes all passed astern of the German battleship. Meanwhile, Commander Fisher's destroyers had arrived, steaming in at full speed from the east. *Virago* and *Opportune* were to the north of *Scharnhorst*, and as they passed, they launched their torpedoes at a range of just over a mile. *Opportune* launched four at 1931hrs, and scored a hit. Two minutes later, she launched her remaining four, and again, one of them struck the battleship. At 1934hrs, *Virago* launched seven torpedoes – one had failed to launch – and two of these struck home. This meant *Scharnhorst* had just received another four torpedo hits on her starboard side.

Meanwhile, at 1933hrs, *Musketeer* launched four torpedoes into *Scharnhorst* at a range of just 1,000 yards, or half a mile. She later claimed two hits on *Scharnhorst*'s port side. *Matchless* had a malfunction on her

The destroyer *Matchless*, one of four led by Commander Ralph Fisher that were attached to Force 2. Having engaged *Scharnhorst* earlier that day, the four ships were also there at the end, launching close-range torpedo attacks against the crippled German battleship.

launcher, and she was forced to turn away without launching anything. While the destroyer attacks had been going in, Admiral Fraser had ordered the British guns to cease fire because of the high risk of hitting the destroyers. Now, both groups of destroyers began to speed away from the area. The gunnery battering could continue, but by now it was clear that *Scharnhorst* was in her death throes, after being hit by at least six torpedoes. She was still afloat, though – just. So, Captain John Hughes-Hallett of the *Jamaica* had turned his cruiser about, and at 1937hrs, he launched the three torpedoes carried in the cruiser's starboard launcher. Two of them struck the starboard side of the German battleship. These proved to be the final blows struck in the battle.



The Fiji-class light cruiser *Jamaica* attached to Force 2 was similar to the light cruisers of Force 1 in that she carried 12 6in. guns in four triple turrets. She also carried six 21in. torpedoes, in two triple mounts, and it was these that dealt *Scharnhorst* her death blow.

By now, *Scharnhorst* was listing heavily to starboard. This exposed the lower portion of her port hull, and so *Jamaica*'s torpedoes struck the battleship underneath the armoured belt, sounding the final death knell. On *Jamaica*, the torpedo officer, Lieutenant-Commander Evelyn Chavasee, watched it all:

> The enemy seemed to resent this, and blazed away with his secondary armament and close-range weapons, but most of his stuff went over our heads. When the smoke cleared, we saw the *Scharnhorst* lying on its side. She looked like a whale that had come up for air, except that she was ablaze from stem to stern.

This was the end of her. At 1940hrs, Kapitän zur See Hintze gave the order to abandon ship.

She heeled over rapidly, and her bows went under. Many of her crew knew their chances of survival were negligible, so they remained at their posts as the ship went down. Others jumped over either side of the ship as she rolled over on her starboard side, but many were killed when they hit wreckage or parts of the sinking ship. Her propellers were still turning as they rose out of the water, as *Scharnhorst*, lying on her starboard side now, began going down by the bow. Many of the men in the water were sucked under, while others were lost amid the rough, freezing sea. The oil spilled on its surface helped flatten the waves slightly. Obermaat Gödde heard some of the men in the water give three cheers for their ship as it went down. They felt explosions beneath them, from deep within the ship, and the pressure was felt in the water. On the *Duke of York*, the radar operators watched the blip of their adversary grow smaller, and then disappear. *Scharnhorst* had gone. Hintze went down with his ship, as did Konteradmiral Bey.

The British destroyers began combing the area with searchlights, looking for proof the enemy battleship had gone down. They found oil, wreckage and bodies. There was also a handful of survivors. When they were rescued, they confirmed that their ship had sunk, and the news was relayed to Admiral Fraser. With that confirmed, at 2035hrs, Fraser sent a signal to Scapa Flow, to be forwarded to the Admiralty. It simply read: '*Scharnhorst* sunk.' An hour later, the reply came back: 'Grand. Well Done.' That was it. The Battle of North Cape was over. Now all that remained was to deal with the British dead and wounded, and the pitifully small handful of survivors from Germany's last fighting battleship.

AFTERMATH

When she left the Altenfjord, the *Scharnhorst* carried around 2,000 men on board. The official complement was 1,840, but this had been increased by at least 100 by the end of 1943. However, a handful of these men had been granted Christmas leave shortly before she sailed. She also carried Konteradmiral Bey and his staff, which amounted to another 50 officers and men. The official tally was 1,972, but other sources place the total a little lower, or even as high as 2,029. The exact number of the German sailors who died that day may never be known. What is certain is that just 36 of them were rescued after the battleship sank. The rest were killed as the ship was being pounded by shells or torpedoes, were trapped when she sank or simply succumbed in the icy water. The expected survival time in the Barents Sea that night was less than ten minutes. On the destroyer *Onslaught*, still guarding the convoy, one young officer recalled: 'After a brief cheer at the final sinking, our sailors fell silent, reflecting with real pity the fate of so

Survivors of the *Scharnhorst*. After their rescue from the Barents Sea by *Matchless* and *Scorpion*, they were transferred to the *Duke of York* when she reached Vænga. Here, a group of them are seen with their guards, standing on the battleship's catapult deck.

many of that green ship's company, consigned, in the Arctic twilight, and with little hope of rescue, to the wintry and unwelcome sea.'

The sinking of the *Scharnhorst* had completely altered the strategic situation. Perhaps the best epitaph for the battleship and her crew was penned by Captain Stephen Roskill, who wrote the Royal Navy's official history of the naval war: 'Whatever we may think of the faulty planning, weak intelligence and uncertain leadership which led to her doom, the *Scharnhorst* had, like the *Bismarck* before her, fought gallantly to the end against overwhelmingly superior forces.' He noted too that like *Bismarck*, the smaller German battleship had taken a huge amount of punishment before she sank, from 6in. and 14in. shells, and from several 21in. torpedo hits. He added: 'Once again the ability of the Germans to build tremendously stout ships had been demonstrated.' Roskill heaped praise on Admiral Fraser's expert planning, and Vice Admiral Burnett's skilled handling of his cruisers. He concluded, though, that the *Duke of York* was the principal factor in the battle. In fact, off North Cape, the real arbiter of victory was the Royal Navy's marked superiority in radar.

When the *Duke of York* reached Scapa Flow, the 37 German prisoners were transferred to the drifter *St Ninian*, and then transported ashore, where they were handed over to the army as prisoners of war. For security reasons, the men were blindfolded before they disembarked.

After the battle, Convoy JW 55B continued on towards Murmansk, and on the morning of 29 December, it reached the Kola Inlet. There it was met by a Soviet local escort force, and the convoy finally reached Murmansk the following day. None of its ships had been lost. Similarly, RA 55A reached Loch Ewe safely on 1 January 1944. Force 1 and Force 2 continued to cover JW 55B as it headed towards the Kola Inlet, as did the destroyer *Saumarez*, whose speed had been reduced to just 8 knots. The day after the battle, she heaved to, so her crew could bury their shipmates. By 27 December, she and the other Allied ships reached Vænga, where the destroyer's wounded were taken ashore for treatment. Despite Soviet entreaties, the German survivors were treated as British prisoners of war, and transported back to Scapa Flow on board the *Duke of York*. Late on 28 December, Force 2 left Vænga, bound for Scapa Flow, and apart from *Saumarez*, the rest of Force 2 followed the next day. After all, there would be more convoys to protect in the coming year.

On New Year's Day 1944, the *Duke of York* entered Scapa Flow, her guns blackened by smoke and her huge battle ensigns streaming. She was cheered by the fleet as she took up her moorings, and awaiting Admiral Fraser were congratulatory messages from the king, the prime minister, the Admiralty and even Roosevelt and Stalin. It was a happy homecoming, and both British admirals were duly rewarded with decorations and accolades. In Germany, the mood was altogether more sombre. On 29 December, news of the *Scharnhorst*'s sinking was broadcast on German radio. Grossadmiral Dönitz distanced himself from the disaster by blaming Konteradmiral Bey for the loss. His part in ordering the reluctant Bey to sea had been

On New Year's Day 1944, the *Duke of York* returned to Scapa Flow, where she was cheered as she passed through the fleet to her mooring off Flotta. In the foreground, the crew of an auxiliary drifter can be seen waving at her crew.

conveniently forgotten. As for the 36 survivors of the battleship's crew, one badly wounded sailor was repatriated to Germany by the Red Cross. The remainder were sent to prisoner of war camps in Canada and the United States, to serve out the remainder of the war. All of them were repatriated to Germany after the war.

The sinking of the *Scharnhorst* brought an end to the Kriegsmarine's threat to the Arctic convoys. They would continue until the end of the war, while their losses to German attacks fell away dramatically. This was due to a number of factors. First, the convoys of 1944 were reinforced by additional escorts, including escort carriers, anti-aircraft cruisers and modern destroyers and frigates. Now, German aircraft attacks became rarer, as the convoys were much better protected. Similarly, U-boat losses mounted as escort carriers and hunting groups of destroyers began to make an impact. By May, half of the U-boats of Gruppe Eisenbart had been sunk, and eventually, the majority of the remaining U-boats were redeployed elsewhere. The loss of the *Scharnhorst* had been a body blow from which the Kriegsmarine never recovered. Hitler lost what little remaining faith he had in his navy, and forbade any more offensive surface operations. This meant the Kriegsmarine was now unable to stem the tide of war on the Eastern Front. Now, all it could do was to try to survive the cataclysms that lay ahead.

The sinking of *Scharnhorst* and the neutralizing of *Tirpitz* had another profound effect on the war. As Admiral Fraser himself put it, 'The strategic

The turret crew of the *Duke of York*'s B turret pose for the camera after the battle, while the battleship rides at anchor in Scapa Flow. Her 14in. barrels have already been repainted, as they were blackened by firing during the engagement.

In Scapa Flow, after their return, Admiral Fraser poses (fifth from left) for a group photograph with the captains of (from the left) *Duke of York*, *Opportune*, *Musketeer*, *Stord*, then *Jamaica*, *Savage*, *Saumarez*, *Scorpion* and *Matchless*.

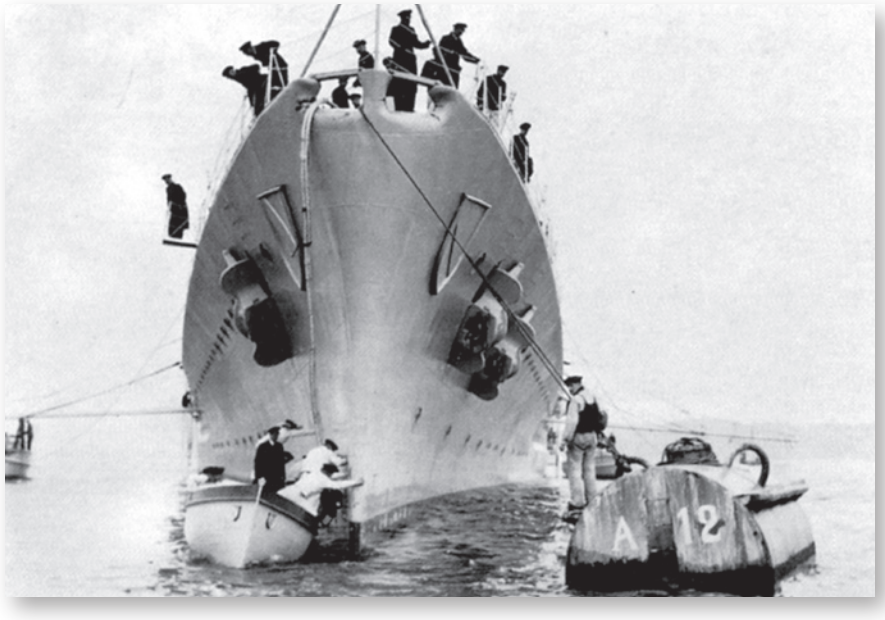
picture had changed.' The Royal Navy had more freedom of movement in Arctic waters, and in the spring of 1944, the Home Fleet was able to go onto the offensive. For the first time, powerful carrier forces could be deployed in the Arctic Ocean, and having achieved temporary air superiority, they were used to carry out a series of attacks on the *Tirpitz*. The German battleship was crippled again, and eventually she was sunk by the RAF off Tromsø, on 12 November. Now, there was no need to maintain so many powerful capital ships in the Home Fleet. This allowed the British to send these ships to the Far East, where they could play their part in the war against Japan. By then, thanks to the sinking of the *Scharnhorst*, the tide of war had moved on, and while operations in the Arctic continued, ultimately victory in the great conflict would be decided in other theatres.

The freedom of movement the sinking of *Scharnhorst* gave the Allies resulted in the Home Fleet carrying out a series of carrier-based air attacks on the damaged *Tirpitz* as she lay in the Kåfjord. She was damaged again, and was finally finished off that November by RAF Lancaster bombers.

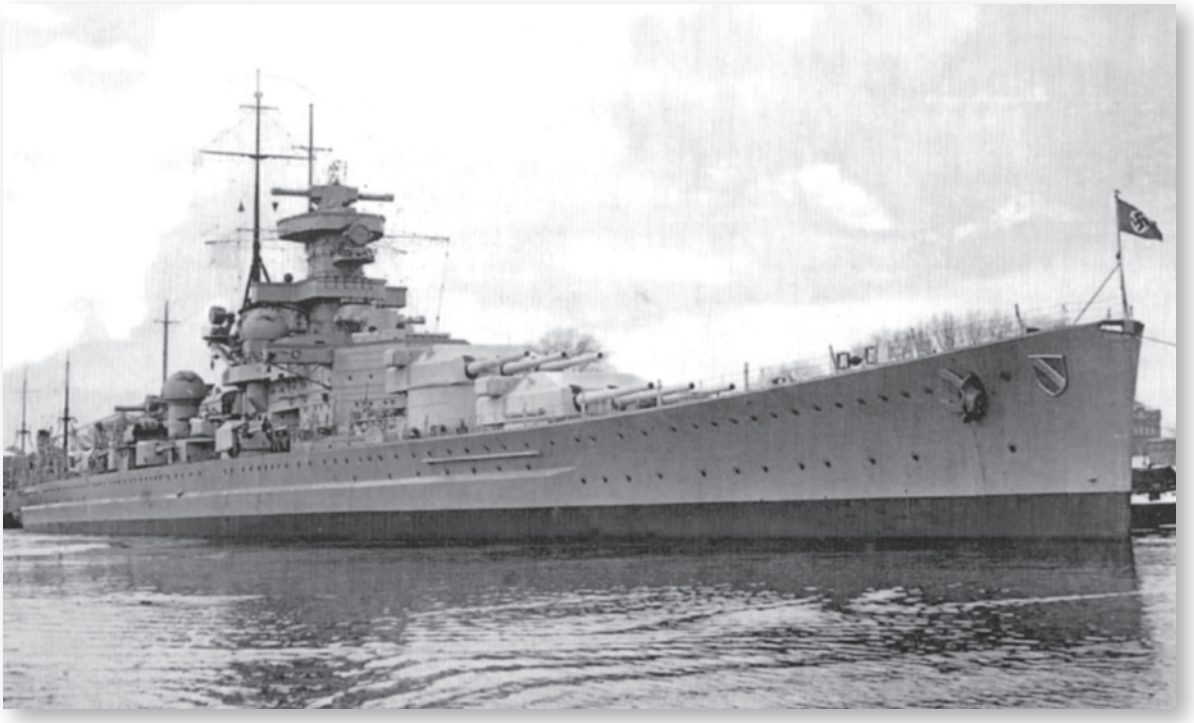
THE WRECK OF THE SCHARNHORST

On the advice of Admiral Fraser's staff, the British Admiralty gave the position of *Scharnhorst*'s sinking as 72° 16' North and 28° 41' East. That placed her 78 nautical miles north-north-east of the northernmost part of North Cape, the northernmost point in Norway. Strangely, the ship's navigator of the *Duke of York* came up with another location, 72° 29' North and 28° 04' East, some 20 miles to the north-west. Wherever it was, the battleship remained undisturbed for almost six decades. Arctic fishermen had discovered that in the approximate area of the second fix, fishing nets often became snagged on underwater hazards. Then, in 1993, a British 21in. torpedo was hauled up a little to the east of the same location. Armed with the remaining navigational information in the *Duke of York*'s logbook, journalist Alf Jacobsen used the Norwegian navy's simulator to refight the course of the battle. This confirmed the second position might be the more accurate of the two. It also tied in more closely to the location reference transmitted by Kapitän zur See Hintze at 1925hrs, shortly before the German battleship was sunk.

In mid-2000, the Norwegian research vessel *Sverdrup II* embarked on a new survey of the Barents Sea. However, the Norwegian government



When *Scharnhorst* sank, a 60m-long section of her bow became detached from the rest of the hull. The likelihood is that this was ripped off as she sank, probably by an internal explosion triggered by one of her last torpedo hits. Her bow now lies some distance away from the main body of the wreck.



Throughout the war, *Scharnhorst* was considered a lucky ship – far more so than her sister *Gneisenau*. Although she was damaged several times, she always made it home safely – until her luck finally ran out off North Cape. She now lies there, 300m below the surface of the Barents Sea.

permitted her use by Jacobsen, in association with British and Norwegian television companies, to examine this second location. Close to it, sonar revealed the presence of a steel-hulled wreck, 160m long – 60m shorter than the *Scharnhorst*. *Sverdrup II* was replaced by the *Tyr*, a naval recovery ship, which sent a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) down to inspect the wreck, which lay at a depth of 300m. Thanks to the images it transmitted, the wreck was identified as the *Scharnhorst*. She lay upside down on the seabed, on a north-east to south-west axis, with her stern to the north-east, marked by her two rudders and three bronze propellors. It appeared as if her bow had been torn off, possibly by some huge explosion. This accounted for the missing 60m of the battleship's hull.

Survivors in the water recalled an underwater explosion as the battleship sank, and the hypothesis is one or more of the last torpedoes that hit the *Scharnhorst* must have struck her just forward of the bridge. This in turn set of an internal explosion, which may well account for the separation of the bow section from the rest of the hull as the ship plunged towards the seabed. The ship would have been upside down when she struck the seabed, but due to the relatively shallow depth – only a little more than the length of the battleship herself – the two parts of the ship landed on the seabed fairly close to each other. The hull itself was surrounded by a debris field of detritus from the sinking battleship, which included her mainmast, a 10m rangefinder, hundreds of shell fragments, a searchlight and the very tip of her stern. As her keel is uppermost, *Scharnhorst*'s superstructure was pinned below her hull. However, it was clear that it had been badly pounded by the British shells, just as it was evident that her hull had been torn and split by torpedo hits, or by other internal explosions. After this examination, the *Scharnhorst* and the last remains of her crew were left in peace.

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OSPREY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
PO Box 883, Oxford, OX1 9PL, UK
1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA
E-mail: info@ospreypublishing.com
www.ospreypublishing.com

OSPREY is a trademark of Osprey Publishing Ltd

First published in Great Britain in 2020
This electronic edition published in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB 9781472842114; eBook 9781472842121; ePDF 9781472842091; XML 9781472842107

Maps by Bounford.com
3D BEVs by Paul Kime
Index by Zoe Ross
Typeset by PDQ Digital Media Solutions, Bungay, UK
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Private Ltd.

A note on photographs

The photographic images that appear in this work were supplied by the Stratford Archive.

Osprey Publishing supports the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity.

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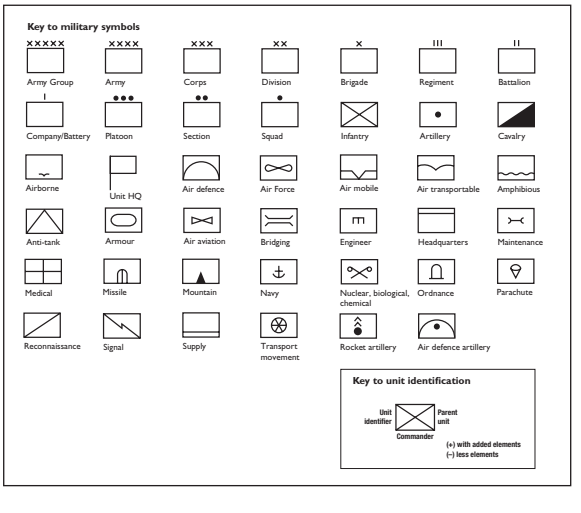
Naval ranks

Enlisted	
Seemann	Seamen
Matrose	Ordinary Seaman
Matrosen-Gefreiter	Able Seaman
Matrosen-Obergefreiter/Hauptgefreiter	Leading Seaman
Matrosen-Stabsgefreiter/Stabsobergefreiter	Senior Leading Seaman
NCOs	
Obermaat	Chief Petty Officer
Bootsmann	Boatswain
Stabsbootsmann	Senior Boatswain
Oberbootsmann	Chief Boatswain
Stabsoberbootsmann	Senior Chief Boatswain
Officers	
Fähnrich zur See	Midshipman
Oberfähnrich zur See	Midshipman
Leutnant zur See	Lieutenant
Oberleutnant zur See	(junior) Lieutenant
Kapitänleutnant	(senior) Lieutenant
Korvettenkapitän	Lieutenant-Commander
Fregattenkapitän	Commander
Kapitän zur See	Captain
Kommodore	Commodore
Konteradmiral	Rear Admiral
Vizeadmiral	Vice Admiral
Admiral	Admiral
Generaladmiral	General-Admiral
Grossadmiral	Admiral of the Fleet



TITLE PAGE
HMS *Duke of York* rides through a gale in the Barents Sea.